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ABSTRACT

Students working together in small groups are a familiar scene in Australian elementary schools. But why are small groups used, and who benefits from their use? This book puts the case for small-group organization in the light of contemporary educational theory. In doing so, the book guides the teacher taking the first steps towards small-group practices, while serving as a refreshing challenge to the teacher who already "does" small-group learning. Clearly structured and filled with examples, the book aims to meet teachers in the middle of their daily practice. It is about curriculum and classroom planning--in particular, about how to plan teaching to manage student learning as effectively and productively as possible. Following an introduction, the book is divided into these chapters: (1) Why Small Groups?; (2) Understanding Small Groups; (3) Planning for Small Groups; (4) A Planning Model for Small-Group Learning: A Summary of the Planning Model; (5) Using the Planning Model; (6) Managing Engagement and Exploration; (7) Managing Transformation and Presentation; (8) Managing Reflection; and (9) Managing Professional Growth. (Contains 74 references.) (NKA)

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To all of our children:

Caitlin, Jonathon, Caroline, Andrew and Declan

— and to the next generation,

Charlie and Anna

Managing small-group Learning

Jo-Anne Reid

with Bill Green *and* Robyn English

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This book contains extracts from *Small Group Learning in the Classroom*, written by Jo-Anne Reid, Peter Forrestal and Jonathan Cook, and first published by Chalkface Press and PETA in 1989.

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Introduction

Over 20 years ago, in 1979, one of us (Jo-Anne Reid) wrote a book called *Small Group Work in the Classroom* with our colleagues Peter Forrestal and Jonathan Cook. At that time we were young teachers who were avidly connected to the changes in teaching and learning that were starting to happen around the world as the 'language and learning' movement became increasingly popular.

What we can now recognise in this period is the emergence of a language-based theory of learning. On the one hand, the learning theories of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky became increasingly available to the English-speaking world. On the other, linguistic-semiotic work (such as that of Michael Halliday) was exploring how language functioned in education and society. Educators — including people like Jerome Bruner, James Moffett, James Britton, Nancy Martin, Douglas Barnes, Courtney Cazden, Gordon Wells and others — began to write about how these theories might impact on educational practice. Here in Australia, charismatic teachers like Garth Boomer led us towards a practical understanding of what this meant for our everyday work in classrooms, such as negotiated curriculum with a focus on outcomes.

Over much of the 1980s, we worked with many of these ideas in our teacher-education courses, developing and refining them in practice, and seeking to link them to new understandings of discourse and power. We have been particularly intrigued by the implications of these ideas for teachers' work, including matters such as programming and classroom organisation (Green & Reid, 1990).

We now feel able to explain and justify the importance of managing small-group learning much more powerfully. This is thanks to the work of several researchers who have shared and extended what were our original 'hunches' and our practice-based knowledge, and whose work has provided clear explanations of why the learning of our students is enhanced through interaction in small groups.

We hope that in this book you will find much that you already know intuitively, and that confirms much current classroom practice. We also hope that you will find much that makes you think differently about what happens in your classroom. What we are asking here is that you seriously consider the learning environment you are responsible for: is it organised in ways that allow you to teach for optimum student learning? This is the sort of question that underlies all professional practice in primary teaching — most particularly when we are thinking about the effects of our teaching on our students' future life chances. We believe that the careful and intelligent use of small-group work in the classroom can help more students to achieve to their full potential than an individualised, competitive learning environment.

This is not a book about 'co-operative learning' or 'collaborative group strategies'. It is a book about curriculum and classroom planning — in particular, about how to plan teaching to manage student learning as effectively and productively as possible. More generally, therefore, this is a book about pedagogy — a term that is becoming increasingly fashionable but is also most appropriate for our focus here. By this we mean, for the sake of simplicity, 'teaching *for* learning' — that is, teaching that is consciously organised around enhancing

student learning. You might think that this is just stating the obvious. However, sometimes teaching is mistakenly understood, and practised, as a matter simply of providing students with information and the 'opportunity' to learn from it.

For us, learning involves transforming information into personal, internally persuasive understandings. Learning becomes a resource for action — 'action knowledge', in Barnes' sense. Good teaching doesn't stop until our students can and do learn. And even then, it always starts up again, in another teaching-learning cycle.

One powerful way of thinking about a comprehensive pedagogy is provided by the multiliteracies framework. This framework was developed by a group of researchers and practitioners who wanted to reconsider teaching practice in the light of the new communications environment (New London Group , 1996). The framework brings together:

- situated practice — immersing students in authentic, active learning
- overt instruction — explicit teaching, whether it be of content or skills
- critical framing — contextualising learning, making it more 'worldly'
- transformed practice — doing something different or new with what has been learnt.

This is avowedly a mixture of the 'old' and the 'new', and it makes sense, as good pedagogical practice* that always involves teachers' professional judgement. We will come back to it in the course of this book.

* PETA's monograph 'Multiliteracies: Teaching and Learning in the New Communications Environment' (Kalantzis, Cope & Fehring, 2002) provides an accessible overview of the multiliteracies framework and associated teaching practice.

We are working with a view of curriculum and teaching which sees a particular relationship between 'management' and 'learning', to be understood as a continuum. We are bringing together the management of learning and the learning of management. Teachers are necessarily concerned with the continuum as a whole. They know that learning must be effectively managed — and not just by themselves as teachers, but by learners, too. And so they also know that it takes time and effort to learn how to do this — how to learn, in short — as well as how best to teach for learning. Hence our title: *managing* small-group *learning*.

One last thing. Although we do provide clear 'recipes' and models for classroom practice, we want to do more than that here. Garth Boomer famously claimed that "there is nothing more practical than good theory", and we agree with him. Just providing strategies and guidelines for practice without an explanation of why they operate in the way they do is both demeaning and undermining of teachers' professional interest. So too is talking as though we all have the same beliefs about learning, and what makes for good teaching and learning. That is why, in the first chapter, we outline our beliefs (our 'political' position, in effect) about learning, teaching and schooling. This will give you our starting point as you bring your own beliefs and understandings to the remainder of the book.

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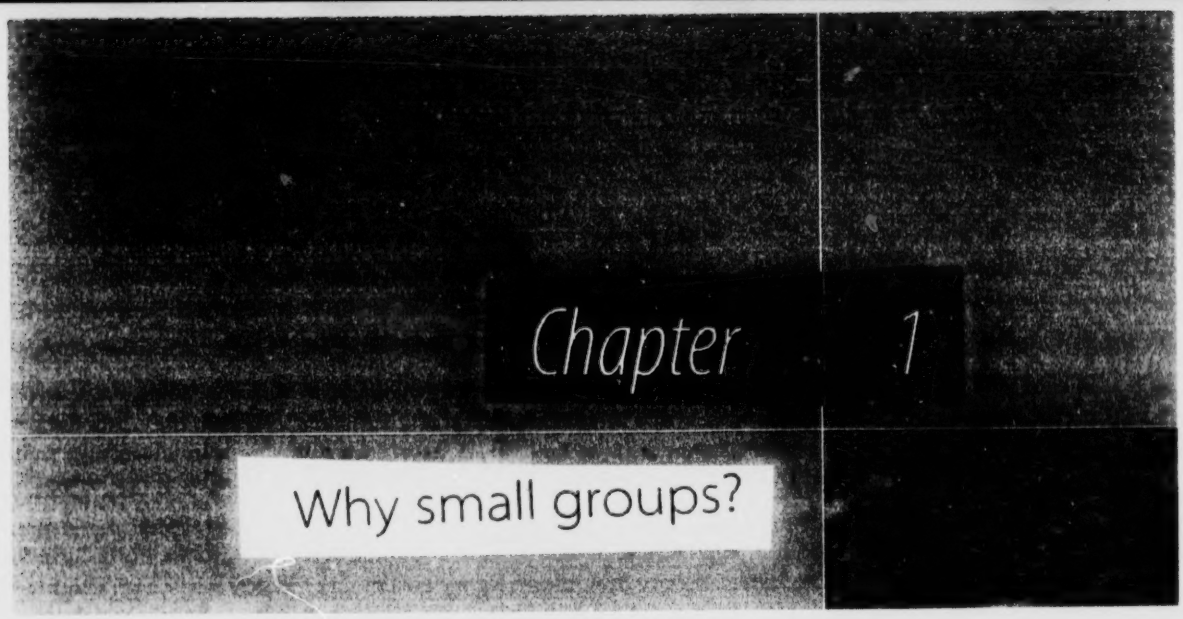

Chapter 1

Why small groups?

Learning, teaching and schooling

We believe that if children come to school with what Pierre Bourdieu (1991) has termed the 'cultural capital' necessary for success in school learning, then our job as teachers is made much easier. However when they don't (because of poverty, or a first language other than English, or family distress, isolation, emotional neglect, or a host of other reasons), teaching them *as if they do* know how to operate in an institution such as school will be of little use. It is not our students' fault if they do not know how to learn in school: it is our job to teach this to them as we teach them the concepts and skills that are legislated in our various curriculum documents.

Many things have changed for us as teachers in the past 20 years. New technologies are part of our daily work, leisure and home lives. There is a sense that we are facing increasing difficulty in just managing our classrooms so that we can feel satisfied that our students are all able to learn to the best of their ability. Problematic student behaviour is a constant worry to teachers and administrators. It is a recurring topic of conversation in staffrooms and corridors, and with parents in classroom consultations. Managing student behaviour seems to worry us more than managing student learning, and it does make a certain common sense to tell ourselves that "they can't learn anything if they aren't behaving". Commonsense is not always our best guide, however. This is a point that we stress in this book: if we do not stand back and question the things we all too often take for granted in teaching, we run a great risk of not being able to see and change those things which are not working well for our students.

We believe that small-group work for learning should be central to all curriculum planning in the primary classroom. We also believe that much of what is seen as 'small-group work' in classrooms today is not group work at all, but is merely individual work planned to be done in group seating arrangements.

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We begin this book with a brief overview of some of the theory that helps us understand why we are prepared to make these claims. We do not want this to be an 'academic' overview, but we do want to honour the work of the people to whom we refer here. The references at the end of this chapter will enable readers to follow up some of the research we mention. We also list a range of other informative reading at the end of the book.

The theoretical support for our belief in the value of small-group work for learning has grown over the past decades. And while we know that many teachers say that they are always tempted to skip over the theory and get to the 'real stuff', we think it is very important that you do read and think about these ideas. Without the mind food of ideas, it is very difficult for us to see beyond what we always see, and it is almost impossible to move out of our entrenched mindsets. In the next section, we take a look at several key ideas from current social, linguistic and literacy theory that inform policy and practice in schools today. Then we explore what they tell us about the importance of talk in how people learn. Finally, we explain how small-group work recognises the importance of shared community when people learn new things, and how it assists us to manage behaviour, movement and time in our classrooms.

Learning as social practice

The work of the North American linguist James Gee through the 1990s has highlighted the importance of attention to the management of students' learning as well as to the content of their learning. He introduces complex social and linguistic theory in a way that speaks directly to teachers' own life histories and our observations of students. He does this by asking us to consider the idea (a key idea in poststructuralist theory) that, as individuals, people do not have any control over the norms of the society that they are born into. He asks us to think about what it means to understand that all people are born into particular and localised ways of talking, thinking and behaving. He calls this our *primary discourse*, and it is this that determines many of our attitudes and ways of being in the world, and how easy it is for us to 'get on' in life.

As we interact with other people and engage in social activities outside our immediate family, we are participants in other *secondary discourses* (worship, perhaps, or football, supermarket shopping, shared book-reading, or debating). In this way, Gee says, we *acquire* mastery of a range of social discourses. But this acquisition needs a lot of time spent participating in the discourse, and a lot of regular practice in doing the things that people do in that discourse. It also requires access to people who already know how to behave, talk and even dress in these situations. It is easy to connect this theory of primary and secondary discourses with Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital — the cultural 'assets' that some people are born with which give them easier access to other social fields than those who are born without this capital.

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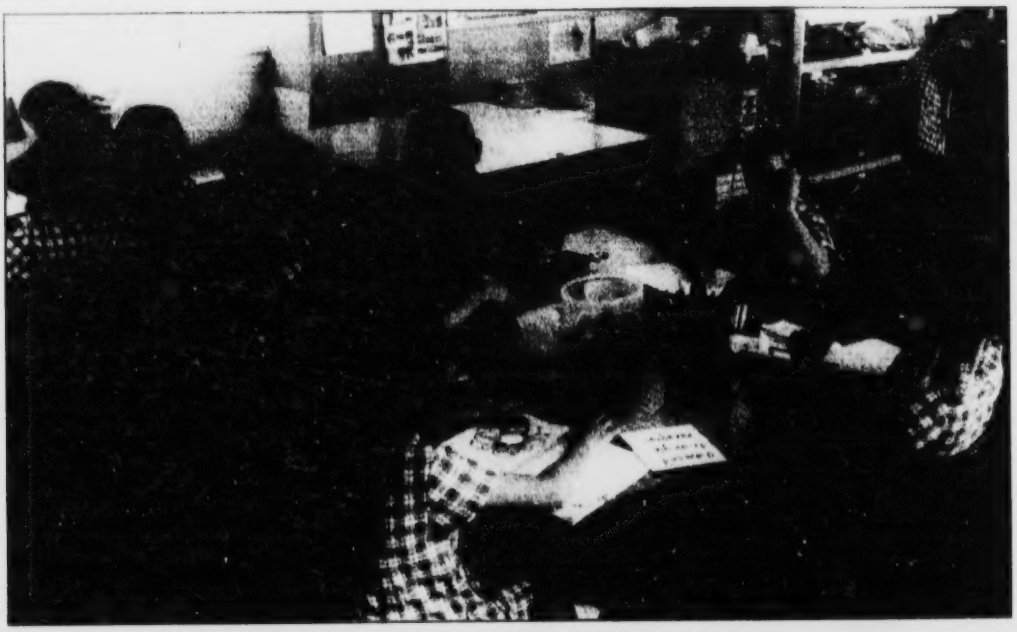

Students come to school with very different cultural 'assets', and some of these are much closer than others to the ways of doing and knowing that are valued in schools.

Gee talks about mastery of these discourses as almost like an 'identity kit' that we are able to put on when we take part in different social practices. But to take part in secondary discourses that we have not acquired through time and experience, Gee says that we need help, and often quite explicit teaching and instruction. A parent removing a crying child from a church service or a cinema is helping that child and its siblings to acquire the knowledge of how people behave in church or in the movies. A teenager entering an RSL club for the first time with his grandfather begins to learn how to behave in this situation when he is told to take off his baseball cap. Importantly for teachers, Gee says (1990) that "we are better at what we acquire, but we consciously know more about what we have learned".

Let's consider the importance of this theory for classroom practice. In some families, children are born into a primary discourse that includes literate practices in Standard Australian English as a natural part of everyday life. Because these children have already acquired much of their knowledge and attitudes to learning literacy at home, the things that their teachers do when they begin to learn to read and write formally in school make sense to them. So they are able to connect this conscious and explicit school knowledge to what they already know unconsciously.

In other families this is not the case. Many children enter the secondary discourse of 'school' without being given the time and practice to acquire unconscious, automatic expertise in things like handling books, taking turns to talk, and using what school sees as good manners. School is therefore quite strange to them, and it is much harder for them to participate appropriately. It may not actually 'make sense', and they may not be able to connect what

they already know and talk about, and how they already think and talk and behave, with what is expected of a 'well-behaved' child in school.

Sociologists tell us that with the breakdown of the nuclear family and with increasing levels of poverty and dislocation in Australian families, there are increasingly fewer children entering our schools who actually fit or even recognise the middle-class model of the school child that schools and curriculum were designed for. This is made more problematic because, as teachers, we *do* fit that model (in fact we are paid to model it!). And there is an added complication: many of us do not have much conscious and explicit knowledge about how familiar discourses work. All of this is a clear justification for explicit and systematic teaching of the 'rules' of spoken, written and visual/embodied language use in the range of secondary discourses that children come to school to learn.

The context for teaching in schools

Since the 1980s, when linguistic research here in Australia (for example, that of Jim Martin and Frances Christie in what we called 'the genre school') began pointing to the need for this sort of explicit teaching, primary-school curricula have changed in response to these findings. For instance, the NSW education department began to recommend that teachers do more than follow the natural-learning and whole-language theories that stressed the importance and value of *acquiring* knowledge of language and literacy. Brian Cambourne's early work advocating 'natural' language learning quite rightly emphasised the importance of this happening in classrooms. He and his colleagues argued that time and practice within a culture of talk, reading and writing would allow students to acquire knowledge of literacy.

But theorists working from a social-justice position, like Allan Luke, began to argue back. They noted that natural- and whole-language approaches stressed the importance of participating in holistic language events for the unconscious acquisition of expertise and pleasure in the discourses of school reading and writing. But, they pointed out, schools did not have time enough to rely on this approach to ensure that all students gained access to a big enough range of written and spoken discourses (genres, or text types) to allow them to be used powerfully in their later learning and lives.

Jim Martin, Allan Luke and others were also correct in pointing out that whole-language approaches really suited children whose primary discourse was close to the discourse of schooling. However, they did not allow children who found little connection between the discourses of home and school to *learn* about uses of language beyond what they were actually participating in, in class. If children were not having regular discussions (in Standard Australian English) at home about the values and arguments presented in news reports, TV or films, they were unlikely to be having these at school, either. Or if they were not having practice in formulating arguments to support their points of view about community or cultural events, it is likely that they were missing out on important skills that other children were acquiring at home, and could therefore use at school.

Similarly, if children did not regularly use informational texts to locate and retrieve information to assist them in the tasks they were doing at home, then there needed to be

time for them to learn to do this in school. There needed to be explicit teaching of the 'secret formulae' behind these sorts of language use in social life. This would ensure that children who did not *acquire* a familiarity with them at home could at least *learn* the rules, and would not be left to flounder (at the bottom of the class) as these more important forms of language use became crucial for success in school.

The idea of explicit teaching* is therefore aimed at uncovering, or laying bare, tacit assumptions that operate in classrooms — assumptions about what the teacher wants and expects, about what the students are supposed to be doing and expecting of themselves, and about what concepts and skills are necessary in order to complete a task successfully.

* PETA's *A Year in Texts: An Explicit Reading Program* (Gehling, 2000) identifies explicit teaching episodes within a year-long reading program, and points out the value of explicit teaching as a way of obviating 'interactive trouble' in the classroom.

Most curriculum documents now ask teachers to go beyond whole-language theories of teaching and learning literacy. They require that teachers support their students in learning to use language, and in learning *about* language. These requirements echo Gee's distinction between acquisition and learning. They also incorporate the critiques of the whole-language approach, which eventually led Allan Luke and Peter Freebody to propose the 'four resources' model for the teaching of reading. This model stresses the need for students to participate in and use a range of materials so that they can acquire the discourse of reading. At the same time, the model highlights the need for students to be able to decode and analyse texts, to ensure that they learn how to participate in the literate discourses of our culture. The scope of literacy instruction in the primary classroom can then be understood, theoretically, like this (Fig. 1.1):

Figure 1.1: *Scope of primary-school literacy instruction*

Acquisition	Learning
learning *to* read/write	learning *about* reading/writing
learning by doing	uncovering the rules, critical literacy practice
whole-language activity with text	systematic instruction about text types
text participation, decoding, use and analysis	text participation, decoding, use and analysis

The role of talk in learning

Most teachers leave university today with an education in what we can call 'constructivist' views of children's learning. They are views derived from Piaget's theory of learning, and they are based on the premise that children actively construct their knowledge rather than simply absorb ideas spoken at them by teachers, or internalise them through rote practice. Constructivist theories claim that children actually invent their ideas, by assimilating new information within what they already know and accommodating their understanding in light of new information. In the process, their ideas gain in complexity and power. With appropriate support, children develop insight into how they think and what they know about the world. Constructivist approaches to teaching mean that teachers need to plan and manage a classroom curriculum that matches and also challenges students' understanding. However, we argue that there is a limitation to cognitive constructivist approaches, and that this is related to the role of talk in learning as outlined by Vygotsky in his account of *social* constructivism.

For Vygotsky, children do not 'naturally' develop if left to their own devices, even in appropriate conditions. He agreed with Piaget that the individual plays an active role in constructing knowledge from the environment, but he stressed the *social* nature of learning. Piaget saw language as a vehicle for expressing thought that had developed in the mind. In this sense, it simply carried meaning — it *communicated* the results of thinking. Learning literacy was therefore a relatively straightforward matter of acquiring skills to read and write print. Vygotsky understood language quite differently. He saw that it *enables* thought, and *produces* meaning in interaction with others. In such a view, talking and thinking are as central to literacy learning as reading and writing. Vygotsky wrote (1978:57) that "every function in the child's cultural development appears twice; first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first *between* people (interpsychological) and then *inside* the child (intrapsychological)". This means that social experience, rather than 'natural development', influences what and how children learn.

We are convinced that talk and social interaction are central to human learning. Indeed, Vygotsky claims that when children work alongside other more expert adults or learners, they can accomplish and learn far more than they can alone. His theory of the zone of proximal development suggests that teaching should focus on tasks that fall in the 'zone' just beyond what the student can currently do alone.

We can see how the current emphasis on 'modelling' our reading and writing processes to students makes sense in Vygotskian terms. And when we think about this further, we begin to see the benefits of multi-age and mixed-ability groupings much more clearly as well. In such groups, the more expert students are *mastering* discourses that they have already acquired. As they help others, they are also required to make rules and processes explicit, and this is a process of conscious *learning*. Less expert children, and newcomers to these practices, are given the explicit tuition they need to be able to *learn* to participate appropriately and effectively. As they in turn help others, or talk with others about what they are doing, their active participation is also helping them to *acquire* the unconscious body knowledge (what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*) associated with the discourse.

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In these terms, then, our oral language is the key to our learning*. It is the basis for thinking, learning and literate communication. It is through thinking, interaction and co-operation with others that our capacity for learning increases and develops. These dynamics add to our life experience by altering or building on the meanings that we have made of the world and the way it works.

* PETA's book *Scaffolding: Teaching and Learning in Language and Literacy Education* (Hammond (ed.), 2001) shows how concepts are built through dialogue, and how the presence of the teacher (or more expert other, such as a more capable student) supports learners in extending their existing understandings.

When we plan for learning in our classrooms, it is useful to keep these theoretical understandings in mind. We can depict the learning process as a cycle in which the learners bring a range of primary and secondary discourses to our classrooms. We are aiming to teach them new information that will help them to participate effectively in a wider range of secondary discourses. Our planning, therefore, must take account of their need to *learn* and *acquire* expertise in new discourses through practice and participation. And if language helps us to make sense of the world, the classroom should be a place where language flows freely and readily from and between the people who are there to learn. The classroom — where students are using their language to come to terms with new information, to make sense of it so that it can become their own — is the context in which the most effective learning will take place.

It follows, then, that the classroom should be a place where students' language and ideas are valued, and are seen to be valued. This is why the *small group* of students presents itself as the basic unit of classroom organisation.

Practical advantages of small-group learning

Allowing students to work in small groups gives them a greater share in the classroom's talk space. It also contributes to their language development, as they get the opportunity to use the language and ways of speaking associated with particular discourses (such as mathematics, science or literature) across a range of language *functions*. At the same time, the classroom organised around the basic unit of the small group will produce a co-operative learning environment that *supports* students' efforts.

Small groups contribute to a supportive classroom environment

- Students develop self-confidence as learners.
- Students who are quiet or disruptive in the more formal classroom setting tend to talk more, and more effectively.
- Students are more prepared to think aloud. They use talk in an exploratory way to wrestle with new information or make sense of new experience. This

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is why we advocate home groups (see also p 35) — culturally and emotionally safe places in which students feel that they are among friends.

- Students generate tentative suggestions and half-formed ideas that will help themselves and the group develop deeper understanding.
- Students gain confidence in presenting findings to a critical audience because they have the opportunity to sort the ideas out first, while developing their sense of audience and of the appropriateness of both oral and written language for different purposes. This means that they develop an awareness of the distinctions between: exploratory talk or writing; preparation, practice or rehearsal; and written or oral performance.

Small groups benefit the teacher–student relationship

In the small-group classroom, the teacher is not a person who *imparts* knowledge. Rather, s/he is the person who *structures* the learning experiences and *assists* students in their learning. This means that the teacher does things differently. For instance, we need to listen carefully to small-group discussion, monitor our students' talk to gauge their level of understanding, and provide assistance at need.

When the class is working in small groups, we are also freer to deal with individuals on a one-to-one basis. This allows us to work towards more evidently valuing and supporting students whose difference from middle-class norms makes it harder for them to learn. For instance, Simpson, Munns and Clancy (1999) stress the importance of what they call the "pedagogical literacy relationship" between teachers and their Aboriginal students. Like all relationships in classrooms, time is needed for this to develop. When we are managing, say, seven small groups rather than 28 individual students (especially if seated in three or four 'table groups'), we are much more easily able to include individuals in our scanning, naming and selection practices.

Small-group organisation also tends to reduce the need to name and categorise groups (although some students and teachers enjoy doing this). Rather than seeing the students in the class as the 'DJs', the 'Orcs' and the 'Zooming Comets' (or even 'Kim's group'), small groups work on quite different lines. These are best explained in terms of *flexible management*.

Small groups allow for flexible classroom organisation

We note the flexibility offered by small groups in our discussion of group size in Chapter 3. This flexibility needs to be planned for and carefully managed until *long-term meanings* about interpersonal relations, respect for differences, a genuine sense of inquiry and a shared language have been built up within the classroom community.

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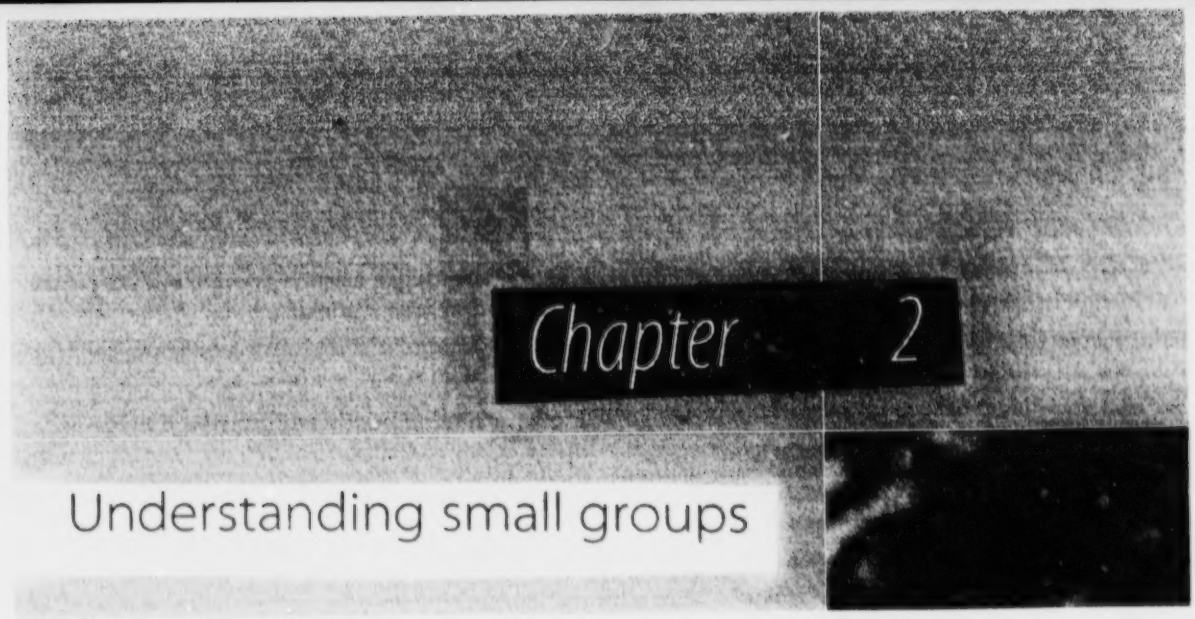


Chapter 2

Understanding small groups

Small groups as communities of practice

Many of the behaviour problems that we face in classrooms today — particularly those we term 'attitude' or 'interest' 'problems — are the result of our students not valuing the social identity of 'being' a successful student. There is not a lot in it for them, particularly when they are not members of the discourse community that values (and sees benefits in) formal education.

Our challenge as teachers, then, is to create *the conditions* that will foster a community that involves and engages our students. We cannot create the community ourselves, because even though we remain the most powerful member of our class group in bureaucratic terms, we know that the power relations in any community are never fixed and static. Even if we 'rule' our classroom by what Michel Foucault calls sovereign power — using fear, punishment and reward to coerce our students into doing what we want them to — we cannot force students to learn. Tensions between power and resistance, and change in the relationships of a community, characterise all social relations. This is not a bad thing. It means that we need not look for the one 'right' way to teach, or refrain from taking risks in our classroom relationships by trying new approaches and ways of working.

These ideas connect with what Lave and Wenger (1991) call *communities of practice*. Communities of practice share the obligation and commitment to complete a common task. They teach their members how to do it as they work. This is the premise for what have been termed 'rich tasks' in the Queensland 'New Basics' curriculum. Such tasks involve the conscious *learning* of curriculum content (or the work to be done by the community of practice) as well as the *acquisition* of unconscious knowledge about how and why the work is done.

The way that some schools encourage their students to plan, design, rehearse and perform a rock (or croc) eisteddfod item is an everyday example of how this works. So are the fund-

raising activities that members of some sporting teams devise, like car washes, street stalls and so on, though often an efficient parent can 'take over' and remove the responsibility (and the learning) from the children. Often, children make or enter communities of practice around their own interests and needs. We have observed, for instance:

- Year 2 boys who joined a national Internet numberplate club (a 'virtual' community)
- a group of Year 5s who set up their own neighbourhood seed-growing business in their after-school care
- Year 4s who came together to make their families' Christmas cards.

These kinds of activities build on and allow valuable acquisition of many 'school' skills and information. Using school learning for real purposes, with other people who share a single goal, is often far more beneficial than twice as many hours of worksheet practice!

The issue for us is that most of the 'real' tasks that children engage in take place out of school — or outside of the formal primary curriculum. In research into connections between literacy development at home and school (Hill et al., 2002), we found several instances of children interacting in sophisticated literacy and numeracy activities out of school while showing little evidence of their interests and abilities in the classroom. Many curriculum and pastoral-care experts are increasingly attempting to foreground this sort of rich, purposeful activity in middle-schooling initiatives. This is why the focus of this book is on planning and managing small-group activity that regularly allows our students to be part of a range of purposeful communities of practice within the classroom.

Small groups for managing classroom learning

Most of us who use group-seating arrangements in our classrooms do so because we recognise that it makes our job of classroom surveillance, movement around the room and control of disruptive behaviour easier. Individualised whole-class tasks place pressure on us either to match tasks to each student or to ensure that we make time to interact with our students individually. Large classes make less time available for either of these activities, and there is growing evidence that these pressures force teachers to "hold unduly low expectations for the progress of pupils" (Kutnick, 1994:22).

This concern was clearly noted in a national discussion paper on curriculum organisation and classroom practice in British schools (Alexander et al.) in 1992, and it has more recently been raised by reports from the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Hayes et al., 2000). The findings of the Queensland study, which involved visits to over 500 classrooms, support a call for a multi-dimensional model of classroom practice called *productive pedagogies*. The four dimensions of productive pedagogies are:

- intellectual quality
- relevance or 'connectedness'
- a supportive classroom environment
- recognition of difference.

We believe that the strategic use of small groups within a classroom that operates as a community of practice can assist us to plan for student learning across these four dimensions. In the next chapter, we explain how small groups can be formed to assist the most productive learning. We conclude this chapter, though, with some comments on how participating in effective small-group work can assist students to master discourses of schooling and curriculum content.

It is clear that teachers cannot simply transmit information to their students and assume that it will be learned. For students to understand new information, they must be given the opportunity to engage in the processes of *coming to know* and understand it, through active participation in problem-solving, exploration, observation and practice. With direction and assistance from the teacher, they must become actively involved with the information they are attempting to learn.

This means that teachers, aware of the types and variety of thinking and talk possible in the classroom, are constantly striving to raise the levels of student thinking about, and interaction with, new content material.

Intellectual quality

It is central to our teaching that our students learn something worthwhile about the material they are studying. We must always answer the question: *what am I going to teach* these students about this topic? A visit to the bakery as part of a unit on the local community can teach students a great deal about how bread is made, about the importance of hygiene for health, and about how people work co-operatively to get a job done. It can also teach them about distribution of labour among a community, and about planning, asking and reporting appropriate questions in a formal situation. Often, though, the excursion is planned fairly much as an end in itself. An accompanying worksheet might cover all of these learning outcomes, but it does not ensure that students consider or learn anything of 'intellectual quality'.

Whether reading a story to the class, introducing a topic on community, or jointly viewing a videotape on the environmental damage done by overuse of water, seeking and finding out *what is significant* is the key to successful planning and teaching. This is the intellectual work of teaching, and it is often removed from our practice by the use of packaged curriculum materials in which the significance is predetermined. Kieran Egan's advice to teachers to plan for *teaching as storytelling* requires us to consider the meaning and significance of *what* we are teaching as the key into planning for learning. When we work with a central curriculum document, we often feel that this responsibility is removed from us, and that we are simply meant to 'follow' what the document says.

We want to reassure creative teachers that this is simply not the case. The Queensland study has demonstrated quite clearly that unless we critically examine our content material and are clear about the meaning of what we are teaching for our situation, we have little chance to provide learning activities that move beyond keeping our students busy. They will, of course, learn something from being busy, but what they learn may not necessarily be useful, interesting or intellectually challenging. As teachers, we must seek to minimise activities in which our students are not required to think, or are asked to engage in relatively low-level thinking.

A hierarchy of levels of thinking, closely following the work of James Moffett (Fig. 2.1), demonstrates the range of levels of thinking and language available to students and teachers in the classroom.

***Figure 2.1**: Levels of thinking*

Simply asking students to *record* information (note-taking from the board, transcribing ideas or observing phenomena or events) gives them little opportunity to think about what they are recording, though it might be a useful basis for further thinking and transformation. When we set tasks that require learners to *report* such recorded information to others (most simply to a partner or other members of a small group), we are asking them to engage more deeply with the information, ideas, and meaning. This is because they need to change the language of the record in order to report its meaning to an audience.

Similarly, tasks requiring the individual or small group to *generalise* from reported instances require students to reformulate and rethink prior experience and language. It is easy to see that the teacher will need to model and demonstrate how generalisations sound and are structured, if students are to be able to practise doing this themselves. When students are

required to speculate or *hypothesise* — predicting possible results, reasons, events, phenomena or attitudes on the basis of their records, reports or generalisations — they must literally rethink their earlier experience and understanding even further.

And at the highest level, questions such as 'What if?' encourage the learner to synthesise and connect existing knowledge and understandings in such a way as to *theorise* about potential possibilities and problems. It seems obvious that higher-level thinking tasks, by their nature more interesting and rewarding than simple recording and reporting, are key factors in the degree to which students will become more involved and more active learners.

Relevance

The idea of 'relevance' includes the things that we do as teachers to connect classroom events to what is happening outside of school. The use of texts and artefacts from popular culture and the media is the most obvious way we do this, along with attention to the regular rhythms of social and cultural festivals and practices. However, an obvious relevance to students' lives does not have to pre-exist a planned classroom project or learning activity.

The real-life examples of communities of practice we mentioned on page 24 show how relevance can produce effort, perseverance and risk-taking amongst even young students because they see the worth of what they are doing. The important thing, though, is that we cannot *assume* the relevance of any material to our students, even if we think its content and style is highly pertinent and appropriate. Many teachers experience disappointment when a lesson using a popular video, computer game or TV show fails to produce the anticipated engagement and interest. This is because *using* material we think will be 'relevant' to the lives of our students is not enough. What we ask them to *do* with it is what 'connects' the activity to what they already know and can use.

Students learn best if their intention to learn is aroused. Within the classroom, relevance is most likely to be achieved if the things we ask the students to do:

- have a clear sense of direction and purpose
- can build upon what they already know
- involve them in active participation, using their own language and cultural images (what Luis Moll calls their 'funds of knowledge') to help them understand.

In addition, questions of *audience* are important here. Each member of a small group of students might be asked to report individually to another group about what their group has found out and recorded about feeding times at Western Plains Zoo from its website. Each of them, therefore, needs to attend and participate in the task. The groups they will report to are formed of people who have researched a different aspect of the Zoo's program and exhibits. After sharing this information, the new groups are then asked to work on the task of planning a class day trip to the Zoo. This is the familiar *jigsaw* technique (Johnson & Johnson, 1987) that works so well to establish classrooms as communities of practice where students see what they are doing as worthwhile because it makes sense as a 'real' (i.e. relevant) task. Even if they are not 'really' going to the Zoo, the whole class can compare different programs for a day trip, and evaluate these as informed judges. In Chapters 4 and 5,

we recommend this sort of jigsaw technique as a regular strategy for the *transformation* and *presentation* of understanding and new learning in small groups.

Supportive classroom environment

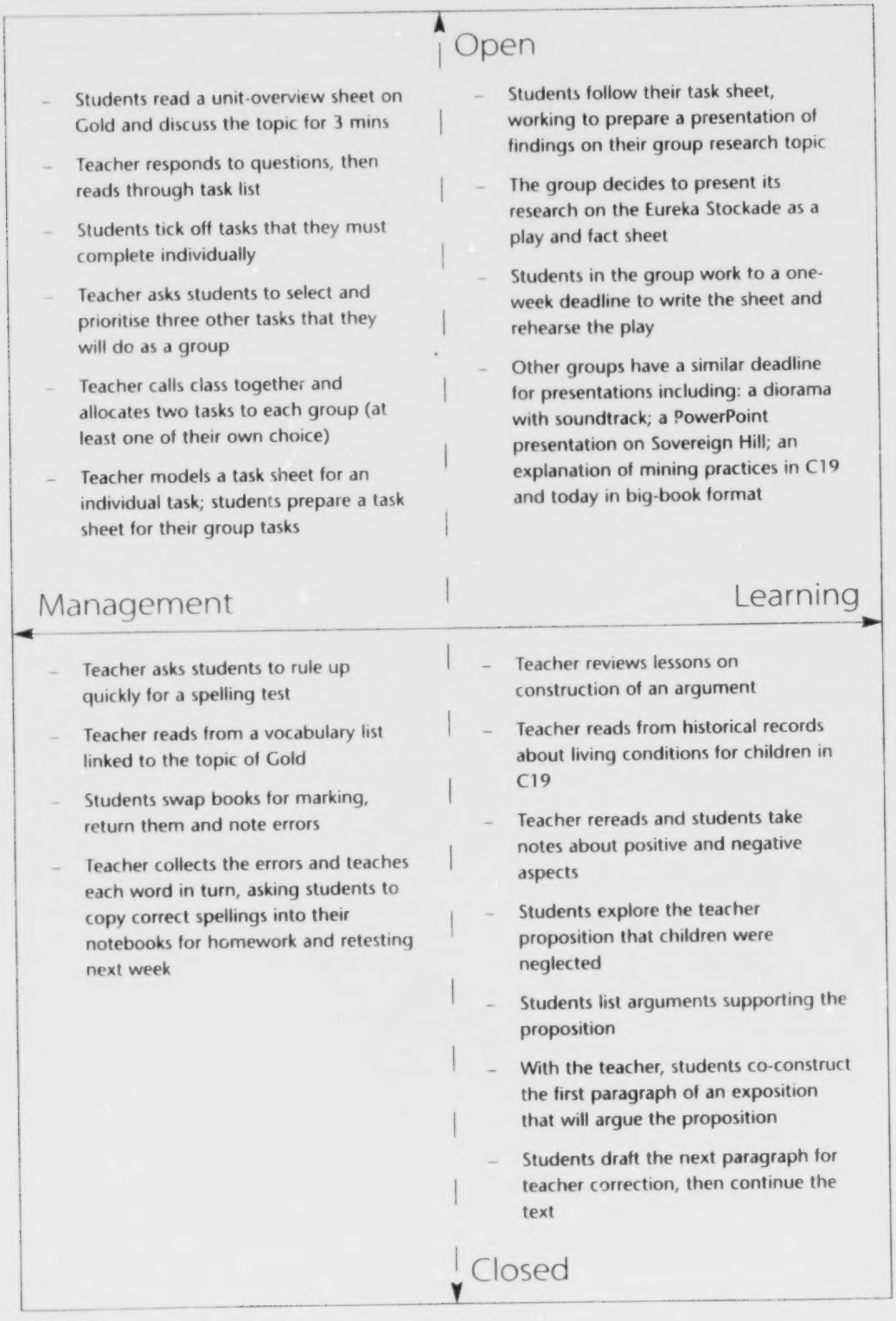
Similarly, students are most likely to become actively involved in the learning activities taking place in the classroom if they have a supportive environment that provides a healthy degree of tension, yet allows them to feel free to make mistakes. They need to feel *safe*, first of all, and so there is a large and central responsibility on us as teachers to provide a classroom that is free from bullying and put-downs, and of racist, sexist and other discriminatory language and behaviour. We cannot expect our students to acquire and eventually master a non-discriminatory discourse of acceptance of social difference if they do not get the opportunity to participate in such a discourse.

Even though they are required to do so at school by government anti-discrimination policies, many teachers find it difficult to uphold and make explicit the 'rules' of an inclusive discourse. Many of us were born into a more discriminatory society. We *acquired* values that do not fit easily with those espoused by the state and educational system today, and we must ourselves now consciously learn to use language and behave in ways that do not discriminate against some of our students because they (or their parents) are not like us. Many of the state policy documents relating to environmental education, Indigenous education, classroom integration of students with special needs, multicultural education, gender and mental health seem unrelated to the daily lives of teachers in many schools. But they are not.

A supportive classroom environment *keeps* learners safe to take risks in their learning. Emotional, as well as physical, safety is essential if the child in school is to learn to his or her full potential. This means that our work towards establishing and enforcing clear and equitable codes of conduct, or rules for classroom behaviour, is a central part of *managing* learning in our classrooms.

This is why we noted, in the introduction, that we see the relationship between *management* and *learning* as a continuum. As teachers, we are necessarily concerned with the continuum as a whole. We know that learning must be effectively managed not just by us, but by our students, too. They need 'metaknowledge' (knowledge about how they learn best) if they are to work as a group together and not be 'managed' by us in order to learn. The following diagram (Fig. 2.2) plots the management–learning continuum in relation to another continuum, which moves from the *closed* classroom environment to the *open* classroom environment. (This second continuum refers intentionally to the idea of closed/open questioning.) The result is a total *classroom field*. In general terms, we believe that it is desirable to move towards the space indicated by the top-right quadrant of the field. However, we must acknowledge that learning can occur in a closed environment, and that management can dominate the teacher's focus in an open environment. In other words, it is likely that teachers will find themselves in all spaces at various points of the week/term/year, but the goal is to spend as much time as possible in the space at the top-right. To indicate how teachers might move through each of these spaces, the figure shows activity sequences drawn from a unit investigation on Gold.

Figure 2.2: *Management–Learning continuum, with indicative classroom interactions*


Open
– Students read a unit-overview sheet on Gold and discuss the topic for 3 mins
– Teacher responds to questions, then reads through task list
– Students tick off tasks that they must complete individually
– Teacher asks students to select and prioritise three other tasks that they will do as a group
– Teacher calls class together and allocates two tasks to each group (at least one of their own choice)
– Teacher models a task sheet for an individual task; students prepare a task sheet for their group tasks
– Students follow their task sheet, working to prepare a presentation of findings on their group research topic
– The group decides to present its research on the Eureka Stockade as a play and fact sheet
– Students in the group work to a one-week deadline to write the sheet and rehearse the play
– Other groups have a similar deadline for presentations including: a diorama with soundtrack; a PowerPoint presentation on Sovereign Hill; an explanation of mining practices in C19 and today in big-book format
Management
Learning
– Teacher asks students to rule up quickly for a spelling test
– Teacher reads from a vocabulary list linked to the topic of Gold
– Students swap books for marking, return them and note errors
– Teacher collects the errors and teaches each word in turn, asking students to copy correct spellings into their notebooks for homework and retesting next week
– Teacher reviews lessons on construction of an argument
– Teacher reads from historical records about living conditions for children in C19
– Teacher rereads and students take notes about positive and negative aspects
– Students explore the teacher proposition that children were neglected
– Students list arguments supporting the proposition
– With the teacher, students co-construct the first paragraph of an exposition that will argue the proposition
– Students draft the next paragraph for teacher correction, then continue the text
Closed

For instance, a teacher might ask her Year 3 class to recite the 5 times table together as a whole class at the start of a lesson aimed to give the students practice in telling the time from an analogue clock. Because she wants them to work in small groups to complete the task, she might then ask each student to work with a partner to recite the table in turns, before joining with another pair to recite in turn around the group. This is an example of how even a single lesson can be planned to move as a dialogue between a management and a learning focus, depending on the teacher's aim.

The whole-class recitation serves the teacher's *management* purposes: it brings the class together, it guides the students to attend to her instructions, and it signals a move to the new lesson (or discourse) that the students will participate in. At the same time, this activity serves a *learning* purpose: it cues the students in, it revises and brings to the surface the prior knowledge that they will need to complete the lesson, and it provides practice that consolidates their *acquisition* of this 'automatic' knowledge. The quick, incidental, pair and small-group activity reinforces listening skills and turn-taking in small groups, and allows the students to perform a simple 'warm-up' activity as a group.

A supportive classroom environment, then, stages and scaffolds students' learning so that they are able to build on what they already know, and build up a repertoire of individual and group work skills. Over time, awareness of this continuous dialogue between *management* and *learning* will allow them, and the teacher, to place more emphasis on successful learning and less emphasis on successful management.

Recognition of difference

Small-group work is a key means of recognising the individual differences that students bring with them to the classroom. Recognising differences between students (their interests, physical strengths or weaknesses, social position, access to participation in middle-class discourses etc.) is essential when planning learning activities for a class. Getting to know our students as individuals over the course of a school year is one of the great joys of teaching, and we know that this is not a process that can be rushed.

Obvious differences between groups of students — such as gender, culture or familiarity with Standard Australian English — are gross but often effective criteria for forming groups for particular purposes. For instance, a Year 5 SOSE (HSIE) topic on 'changes to work in the community' immediately suggests the value of planning at least one activity in which the class works in groups of mixed gender. Here, a teacher might plan a task that involves the class in researching and reporting on work that is:

- reserved for men in our community
- reserved solely for women
- done by both men and women.

This task suggests a number of possibilities to manage and learn from gender differences within the whole class. Should groups of girls be asked to research 'men-only' work and groups of boys 'women-only' work? This is a decision that the teacher might make with a

class she knows well, although at the start of the year she might decide to ask the groups of boys to research men's work and girls to research women's work.

Once the students come together as mixed groups, their reports can be used as the basis of generalisations about the kind of work men and women have traditionally done. Having shared their initial work, the mixed-gender groups might be asked to predict the sort of work that is now available to both men and women, and then to research and present that together. Different groups within the class might then be assigned to research different categories of work, such as paid/unpaid, 'blue-collar'/'white-collar'. This provides a clear reason for group members to present their generalisations and hypotheses to each other, and then to synthesise the findings into a report for the whole class.

But within such a framework, the teacher moving towards more open management and learning which recognises and works with student difference will try to ensure that students have:

- a degree of choice and responsibility for what, when and how they learn
- time to think and reflect about what they have learned
- time to explore how they learn.

Working *with* the differences our students bring with them to our classrooms — rather than attempting to ensure that they all do and learn the same things in the same way — is essential for equitable, stimulating and enriching teaching and learning. We must recognise that 'difference' means difference *from* people who participate easily in the powerful discourses of school and social life that lead to success. As teachers, we must plan to ensure that our 'different' students are able to bring their own funds of knowledge to bear on classroom learning tasks. At the same time, we must also plan to ensure that they are part of a community of practice that enables them to participate actively in the powerful discourses of school and civic life. It is this community that will 'teach' them much of what they need to know for success in their future learning and lives.

Ability

In the small-group classroom, the presence of a less able student often means that the others need to explain and clarify what s/he does not understand. So, at the same time, this student is helping *them* to understand more clearly what they are talking about.

Less able students are more likely to become engaged in the learning process if they have opportunities to become involved in helping the group achieve its goals than if they are required to listen passively to the teacher, copy notes from the board, or fill in meaningless exercises or worksheets.

Although not all members of a group may appear to be contributing equally, both talented and less able students will benefit from working together. This is especially so in junior-primary classes. Younger or less able students receive enormous benefit from those who are just a little more competent than they are. The reciprocal benefit to the ones who have newly mastered a skill or understanding, in demonstrating or explaining it to their peers, is similarly great.

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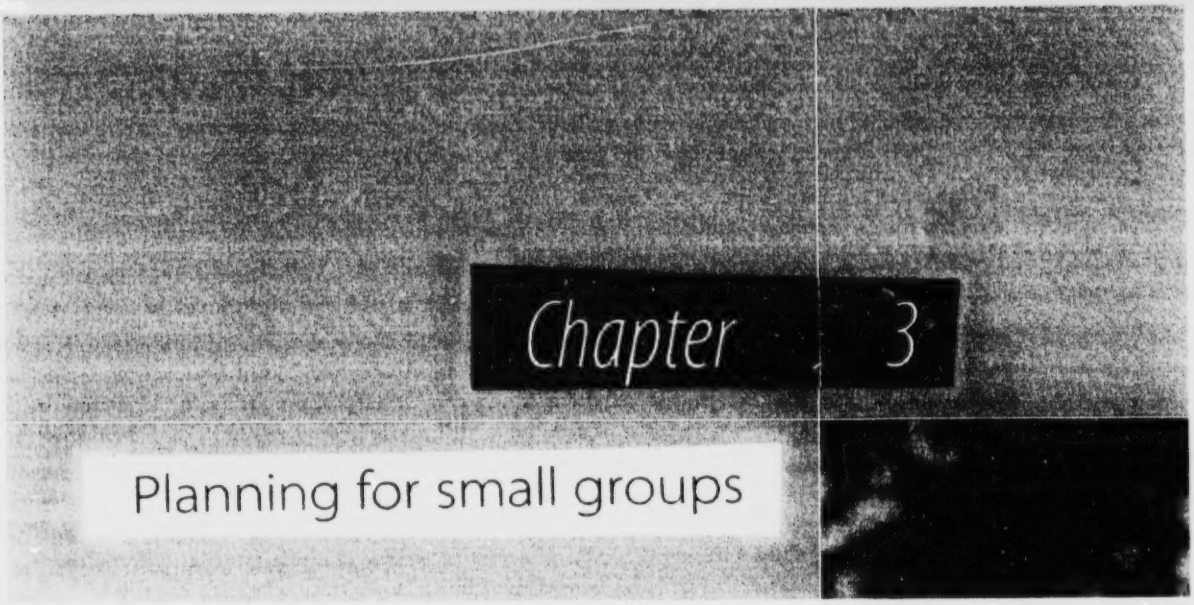


Chapter 3

Planning for small groups

In this chapter, we turn our focus towards how we can most easily plan to manage student learning in our classrooms. We will consider the benefits and problems of small-group work. We will then look at types of group structure, showing how our teaching purposes (*what* we are trying to teach) suggest the optimum structure of groups (*how* we ask students to work).

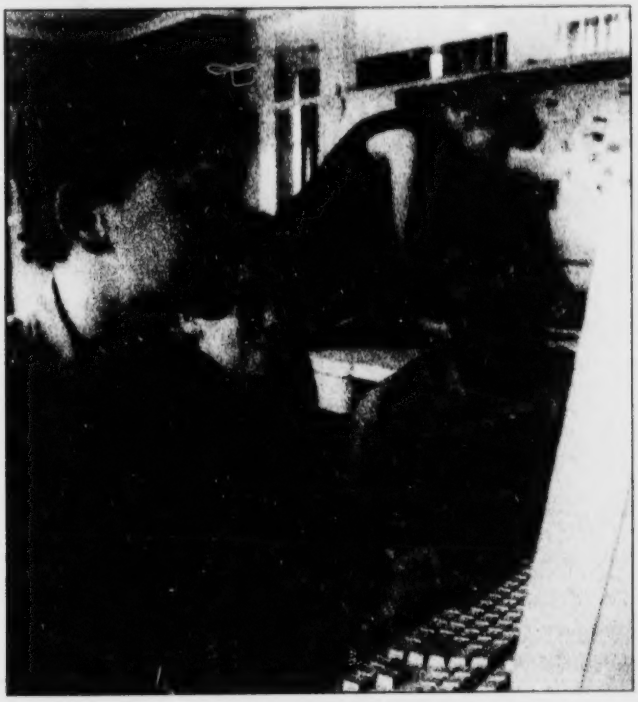
Group size

We believe that using small groups of four as the *baseline* for teacher planning is the optimum way to manage student learning. This does not mean that the students *only* work in groups of four, but that they come to see the small group of four as the normal setting for everyday classroom interaction. Our belief in the value of groups of four has not changed over 20 years. Groups of four students are recommended for a number of reasons:

- All students can be seated facing each other, yet no student need have their back to the board or teacher when we want attention at the front of the room.
- Four seems to be the optimum number to allow for a good range of experience in the group, as well as for individual contributions. Within larger groups, the contributions of quieter members may be overlooked.
- It is easier to listen carefully as a member of a group of four than as a member of a class of thirty, or a group of six or more. The greater intimacy and involvement offered by the small group — together with the greater opportunity to respond to and act on what others say — make it a better situation for developing students' listening abilities than a whole-class discussion.

- A group of four is the most flexible in terms of planning and management. It easily becomes two pairs, three become two groups of six, and so on. Of course, if the number of students in the class is not a multiple of four, then the teacher can allow a group of three and a pair, or a group of five. Groups of four are our recommendation, not a rule!

Interestingly, the use of groups of three is heavily discouraged by some research into problem-solving (Bennett & Dunne, 1990), which suggests that unequal power relations can too easily leave one student out of a triad, while this is much less likely in a group of four. It is important to remember, though, that there are often great advantages in asking students to work in groups of three for particular purposes, such as around a computer screen. Kutnick (1994:23) claims that three is a good number to use for computer groups, as "the dynamics of a triad will allow two pupils to discuss problems while a third manipulates the computer".



A group of three optimises interactive learning around a computer.

But power relations among the members of small groups is not the only concern for teachers beginning to use group work for *teaching* rather than for organisational purposes. Jerome Bruner, an early advocate of Vygotskian theory in the US, said that "group work is a potential challenge to the traditional role of the teacher as the one who is in control of knowledge and organization of the classroom".

This is true only in so far as well-managed group discussion often takes students away from the tightly 'closed' control of the teacher. If all classroom talk is not directed through the teacher, and accepted or rejected by us as 'relevant', 'appropriate' or 'on the topic', then much talk that we might ordinarily refuse will be allowed. This is not a problem; in fact, *this is the benefit* of small-group work for students whose familiar discourses do not match nicely with the formality of school learning. They can use their own ways of talking and thinking to help them learn. In whole-class discussions, these students can often remain silent, or else participate in ways that we find inappropriate.

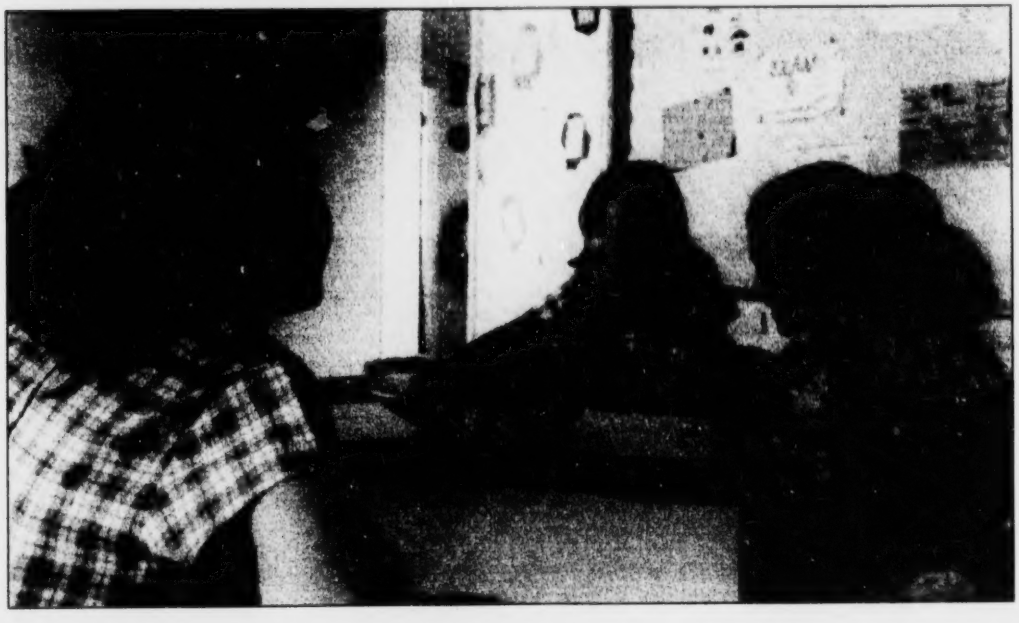
However, if the teacher has not carefully planned for small-group learning — and instead has sought to use small-group discussion or a small-group activity as a novelty or solution to student disengagement — then s/he *will* very likely be 'challenged', in Bruner's sense.

Types of small groups

Home groups

Home groups are the places where the students feel safest. They are *friendship* groups, mostly, and they are the groups to which the students move automatically at the start of the day. These should be groups of four. Forming these groups should be done *with* the students, as the basic ideas of group work in the classroom are explained to them. It is within the home group that students often start an activity, and though sometimes it is useful to have them stay in friendship groups to complete a learning task, it is often preferable that group members learn to work with other people, for other purposes.

Students in home groups can easily work individually or in pairs. They can move to form a wide range of reconstituted sharing groups, or operate as a whole class. The determining factor is the form of organisation most suited to the particular learning activity. It may not be appropriate to invite students to form friendship groups in some settings (e.g. in the preliminary/kindergarten years), where teacher-formed groups are usually more effective.



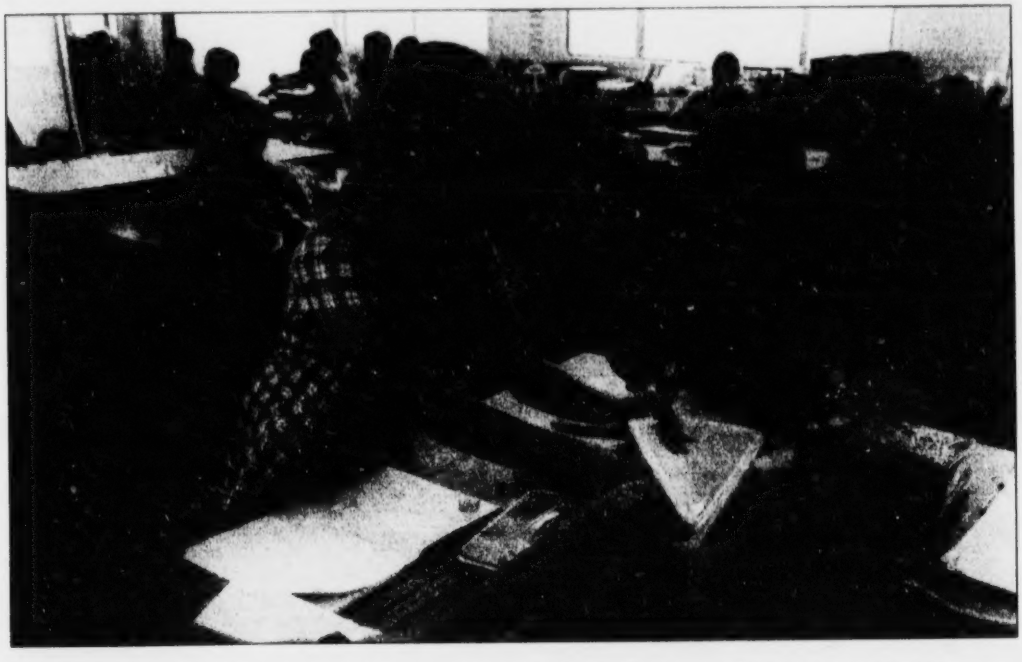
Home groups are built around friendship and trust, enabling a free exchange of ideas.

Work groups

Work groups are formed according to the needs of the learning activity. For instance, we talked in Chapter 1 about groups based on gender, but teachers in some schools might be able to form the work groups that include one person who can speak two languages (say for a lesson on word origins). An activity designed to measure and record students' heights

may mean that the teacher plans two sorts of work groups at different stages: the first work groups might each need one comparatively tall child and one short child; at the next stage, the work groups might be composed of all taller students, all shorter students, and all middle-sized students. This would allow the teacher to plan for two different transformations of the concepts that s/he is trying to teach (i.e. height measurement in an empirical and comparative sense).

What the class comes to learn, and what the teacher needs to be explicit about telling them, is that work groups are not about socialising. They are for work — to get a job done — and students are not necessarily teamed with their friends. But they always get to go back to their 'home' group in order to discuss and reflect on what they have been doing at 'work'.

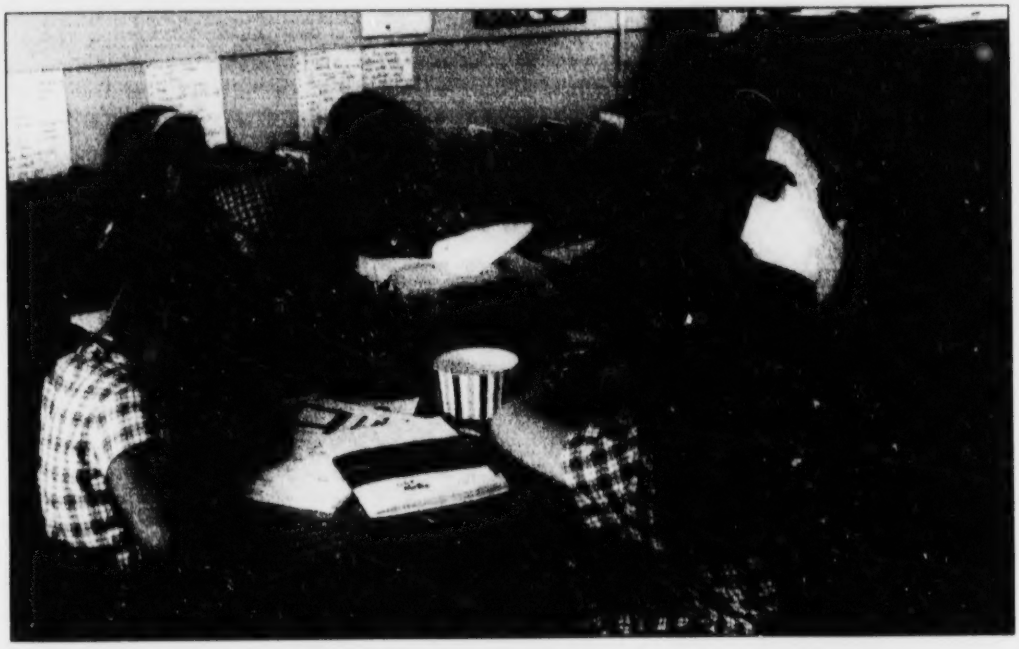


Work groups are established around the nature of the selected task. They are formed to 'do business'. Students should be free to pursue tasks alone if they choose.

Sharing groups

Sharing groups provide students with an audience for their 'draft' thinking and for presenting the outcomes of their work. Sharing groups form and dissolve at different stages of the lesson or unit of work. They may be planned or in response to need. An impromptu sharing might be needed when the teacher notices that she can capitalise on an interesting news item from the previous night's news that she has been asking her Year 6 class to watch. Noticing that several home groups are talking about the same news item, she may quickly form sharing groups so that members of those groups can tell others what they have been talking about before moving into a whole-class discussion about the event. This not only makes the item itself seem more 'important' and therefore interesting to discuss, but it also

helps to ensure that the whole class is engaged and is starting to think about the event before the whole-class discussion. In such a case, the sharing groups might operate for only two or three minutes, but the benefits of using this sort of small-group activity to create interest are huge. By contrast, asking one student to tell the class about the news item before the whole-class discussion commences produces a very different 'feel' to the discussion, and often takes just as long.



Sharing groups provide a certain formality to the presentation of students' news or research findings. Students in a sharing group can act as both audience and as 'critical friends'.

We can see that small groups enable students to make the best use of the learning time in the classroom. Learners generate more ideas in collaborative settings than they do individually or in a whole-class group, and they have more incidental and planned opportunities to use language (reading, writing, listening, talking) as an instrument of learning. At the same time, students can learn from each other and they can teach each other: explaining, questioning, reminding and imagining in the language and patterns of interaction with which they are most practiced and comfortable. This allows us to work with difference, as students learn to recognise that their own experiences and thoughts are of value when they are learning new concepts and information.

As we become more familiar with organising, managing and planning for small-group learning, we find that what may at first seem a complicated and major shift in our professional learning is in fact merely a means of enabling us to use our existing knowledge and expertise more efficiently.

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Chapter 4

A planning model for small-group learning

This chapter reviews and re-uses the planning model set out in *Small Group Learning in the Classroom* (Reid, Forrestal & Cook, 1989) — a model based on the work of 'The Geraldton Project' (1976–78), and especially its leader teachers Peter Forrestal, Bill Louden and Bill Green, and educational consultant Jon Cook. Their work is gratefully acknowledged here.

This chapter presents a framework for planning a lesson, a series of lessons, and an entire unit of work. Once familiar with it, as teachers we are able to cycle through it regularly or 'work the model' creatively — using it to suit our own ends and the needs of our students.

The purpose of the model, originally adapted from Barnes (1975), is to ensure that students can move from *receiving* information towards *understanding* what we teach them. Our adaptation was based on experienced teachers' analysis of what made their good lessons so successful, and of what was missing when their students failed to learn. They found a striking commonality in terms of their good teaching, regardless of year level, subject area or available resources.

As you read this chapter, you will recognise much that you already know and do in the classroom. As a pedagogical model, these ideas are not new, and they make 'common sense' to teachers who have acquired their knowledge of good teaching unconsciously, through participation in the discourse of school. Even so, newcomers to this discourse, along with those of us who want to continue our professional growth and add finesse to our teaching, will find here a framework and a set of terms that give clear expression to a somewhat 'hidden' pedagogical knowledge.

Importantly, too, the model allows for all strands of language (reading, writing, listening and speaking) to be involved in each stage of the learning process.

If we want our students to understand what we teach, we must give them the opportunity to *personalise* knowledge. We quoted from Vygotsky in Chapter 1 to highlight the need for

teachers to understand that learning is not a 'one time through' affair, and that teaching, therefore, is never just *telling*. Vygotsky says (1978:57) that everything we actually learn is processed twice: "first, on a social level, and later, on the individual level". Teachers cannot give students knowledge; they can only help them *come to know* by providing structures within which students can develop their own understandings — by participating in social interactions as members of a community of practice.

We must never forget that all schools are real-life communities of practice. Unfortunately for many of our students, they are ineffective in that they do not produce the learning outcomes that the community is aiming for. As teachers, we know that this is often because of constraints of time, a crowded curriculum, irrelevant content materials, and school environments that do not support significant (intellectually rich) learning. We believe that *time* is our biggest constraint. Time limitations can have serious consequences when we consider the importance of time for acquisition of concepts and skills in unfamiliar discourses, not to mention the time that is necessary for the explicit instruction that enables learning.

These limitations have to be acknowledged, and this book is written with a view to supporting optimum, rather than ideal, conditions for learning. We know that all of our students would learn 'better' if they were in smaller classes, or if we could even work regularly with them one-to-one without interruption, or if school was not so isolated from interactions with the rest of the world. Unfortunately, this is not the case. But within the limitations our work conditions place on us and our students, small-group work allows us to *involve* students in their learning as much as we can.

We must also acknowledge that learning for mastery generally requires effort and a measure of struggle on the part of the learner. It is not always *easy*! Helping our students to recognise this may be of more benefit to them in later life than giving them praise and reward for low-quality work.

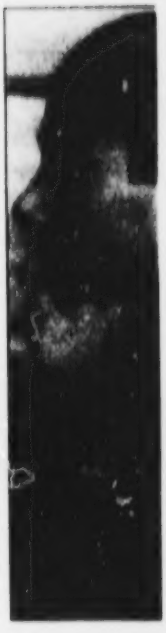
The planning model that follows involves a process that requires learners to be active participants. It gives them the responsibility to think, solve problems, and evaluate the outcomes of their efforts in realistic ways.

A model for planning learning

This planning model consists of five stages: engagement, exploration, transformation, presentation and reflection. All of these need to be planned for, and they can be followed in sequence as a *learning cycle* (Fig. 4.1). Alternatively, they can be elaborated as branches or mini-cycles within each stage.

Figure 4.1: *A basic planning model, shown here as a learning cycle*

Engagement



This is the stage during which students acquire information and engage in an experience that provides the basis for (or content of) their ensuing learning. The teacher usually decides what needs be covered over the year, the term, each unit in the term, and the week. This is what Wells (1999) calls the *macro* level of decision-making for planning. Macro-level decisions are often made co-operatively by teachers working at the same year level, or stage, in accordance with the learning outcomes mandated by curriculum documents. They give us the framework within which we then select particular content and resources to teach our own classes.

At the *engagement* stage of learning a new concept, or beginning a new topic, the teacher should provide a shared experience for students so that they have common ground on which to base their learning. The initial information may be provided in a wide range of ways, including:

- teacher talk or explanations on whiteboards or blackboards
- stories or information from books, news media or magazines

- films, TV programs, videos, radio programs, tape recordings, CDs
- activities, demonstrations, excursions or guest speakers.

Sometimes this stage will begin with a sharing of the *students'* knowledge and experience (as we illustrated in Chapter 3 when we discussed the formation of sharing groups for this purpose).

Engagement should involve more than just the provision of new content material by the teacher. For the students to become engaged in an activity, they need to understand *why* they are examining this particular topic, text, information or material. They also need to understand how this particular lesson, or unit of work, *fits in* with what they have done before and what they will study in the future. Learners need not only a sense of direction but also a sense that they are getting somewhere — that there has been a change, a growth and a development in their understanding of the world and their place in it. This is something that teachers have to plan for very deliberately. It should never be a case of teacher and students simply passing time together, growing older but little wiser.

Students generally become engaged (or their intention to learn is aroused) when they become curious or puzzled about what they are to learn. They must recognise the 'problem' and they should want to resolve their curiosity. It must, therefore, *matter* to them, as well as to their teacher.

This, of course, is easier to say than it is to achieve. For instance, we know that narrative structure may not be intrinsically interesting to many students at all. But we do have to teach it. What is important, then, is for the work (not fun!) to be made more engaging. That is why framing the activity as part of a larger program within the classroom community of practice is good planning at the meta-level. For example, if learning experiences around narrative structure are framed as part of a larger activity in which the class will produce a set of narratives about an incident in the lives of well-known people in their town or suburb, these experiences will immediately sit within a more relevant context.

By the end of the engagement stage, students need to know where they are going and why, and what they are expected to learn from the journey. They should be conscious of the ways in which their learning path is going to reach these outcomes.

Exploration

At this stage, students have the opportunity to make an initial examination of new information or ideas. They can make tentative judgements as they apply their experience and understandings, and connect new information with what they already know. In doing so, they need to feel free to make mistakes or not fully understand new concepts.

Exploration should encourage thinking aloud and so, in most cases, it is best achieved if students work in their home groups of four. However, there are often times when exploratory talk is more successful in pairs, and other times when individual exploratory writing or drawing is more appropriate.

The focus at this stage is not on students using language to communicate what is known but on language being used as an instrument of learning. Thinking aloud, for example, enables

Chapter 5

Using the planning model

The programming and planning of each year's classroom learning is one of the most important tasks that we undertake as teachers. Our work programs serve both as the texts through which we document and show accountability for our work, and as a record that reflects our professional growth. They also document our own knowledge and attitudes, and the decisions we make about managing learning in our classrooms.

Because the small-group planning model arose from practising teachers' attempts to represent their knowledge and understandings of how children learn, it *works*. We find that the model is useful even when we are not planning for small-group learning in particular. We hope that the notes and suggestions provided in this chapter prove helpful for teachers who are interested in trying out the model in their classrooms.

Small-group work does not require a major alteration to individual programming styles. Rather, once the planning cycle is used a few times, it becomes an automatic tool that helps teachers to generate interesting and varied learning sequences. New teachers will find the planning model to be an effective means of planning individual *lessons*; more experienced teachers will find that the model often cycles through a day, a week, or a couple of weeks.

Sometimes, depending on the timetable in the school, teachers plan separate cycles for different subjects — preferring, for example, to work from a packaged curriculum for maths (or health education), rather than integrating maths time with larger projects. While this may be a constraint set by the school, it means that the teaching and learning of maths may remain removed from a 'community of practice' — both in the teacher's head and in the students' experience. This separates maths from integrated, activity-based planning, and thus from the relevance and 'connectedness' shown by the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study to be essential for good learning.

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students to use talk to grapple with ideas and to clarify thoughts. It is a time during which students are likely to be hesitant and tentative, or use their home language if Standard Australian English reduces their range of expression.

This is a most important stage in all learning activities. We should provide time and opportunity for it as a regular part of our teaching routine. Whenever students encounter new information, they need to have the chance to explore it for themselves first, before being asked to transform it in particular ways.

No task should be set for the exploration stage other than the instruction to 'talk about it' within a home group or with a partner, or to 'think about it' with paper and pen. As teachers, we know that if we do not permit students to talk about new material, information, events or experiences in the classroom, they do it anyway. Talk becomes an undercover, undervalued and underutilised means of establishing relevance, or 'connectedness' between students' home and school lives.

As we will discuss in detail in Chapter 6, exploratory talk may occur at all stages of the learning process. However, the exploration stage differs from the others in that it is the time when teachers deliberately take a step back and remove themselves from the classroom talk. They become observers — watching, listening and learning just how much (or how little) information and experience the learners are bringing to the task. In this role, teachers can identify students' emerging enthusiasms. They can also take note of any difficulties that students encounter in trying to connect their prior experience with the new material. Sometimes further information is needed for all (or just some) groups, requiring the teacher to change the planned sequence. Instead of moving straight to a transformation activity after time for exploration, the teacher may need to provide more information to re-engage the students. In this way we can see how use of the planing model allows us to cater for individual needs and teach flexibly.

We also need to monitor the amount of time students have for exploration, making adjustments so that they have neither too much nor too little time for profitable discussion. In a typical lesson, this might take between one minute for a quick pair sharing, up to ten minutes for more substantial exploration of a topic in a middle-years classroom. This stage will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Transformation

At this stage, the teacher intervenes and explicitly asks students to *use* or to *work* with information in order to construct a deeper understanding of it. They are asked to focus on aspects of the information that lead to the desired outcomes of the learning activity.

Transformation activities might involve clarification, ordering, reorganising, elaborating, practising or using new and existing information in a purposeful way. Some transformation activities might well be simple practice worksheets that consolidate skills. However, the teacher who plans for small-group work will use worksheets differently from the teacher who treats the class as a 'whole group of individuals'. For instance, worksheets might be distributed to pairs with the instruction that one student should do the even-numbered questions, and other the odd-numbered questions. The students will then correct each other's work. In the process, they still address all questions, but they do so in different roles,

necessarily using language associated with the topic as they check and 'mark' each other's work.

Transformation activities are crucial to the results and quality of student learning. They must be selected carefully, with reference to the aims of the overall teaching program. Any text or piece of information is susceptible to a wide range of *possible* transformations, all of which could involve learners in potentially profitable activity. However, only some of these will lead students towards an understanding of the material most appropriate to the outcomes that are being sought.

Choosing appropriate transformation tasks is one way that we can recognise, value and work with difference in our classrooms. For example, students may develop a richer understanding of information if they are asked to represent it as a drawing, diagram or flow chart. This requires them to examine texts or data closely in order to decide on the best means of graphic representation.

However, a transformation activity such as this is unlikely to be a particularly good group task if the information is too complex. Year 2 students can quite easily work together to make a flow chart of the activities they do when the class goes to the library each week, because it is part of a shared discourse. Yet they might find it very difficult to produce a group chart of the things they do in the mornings before they come to school, as these are likely to be too different. Such a task might be more appropriate on an individual basis. The individual charts could then be brought to home groups for sharing before a shared sequencing activity.

When working on a transformation activity, students should have a clear idea of the amount of time they have to complete their task, and of the anticipated outcomes. They should also know how they are expected to present their findings. Our teaching role is now different from that employed at the engagement and exploration stages. During transformation activities, the teacher needs partly to monitor the students' learning and partly to teach. We are most likely to operate on a one-to-one or small-group basis in response to student needs, constantly roving and available to intervene in order to:

- correct misconceptions and provide additional information
- guide students in the development of their learning
- reset short-term objectives.

Presentation

Requiring students to explain what they have learned can play a worthwhile part in the process of moving them from *receiving* information towards *understanding* it, and exercising control over it. Presentation of work outcomes provides a degree of tension and gives a sense of purpose to group work.

Having to explain what they have learned to an interested group reinforces students' understanding of new information and, in fact, often enables them to test for themselves whether they really know what they are presenting. In addition, the feedback students receive enables them to determine how successful their work has been.

Students are mainly asked to present their findings to an interested and critical audience in sharing groups. The whole class can sometimes function as a sharing group, though if this happens, the teacher must be careful to avoid the repetitive 'report back' sessions that occur if all groups are doing the same thing. This is easily avoided. Sharing times can be planned so that, say, two groups report back to the class. Other groups then add to or critique the findings that the reporting groups have presented. Sometimes, the teacher may want all groups to have their work displayed and shared with the whole class. This is valuable if groups have been working on different, but related, tasks.

However, to encourage the optimum use of language for both ideational and interpersonal functions, we feel that it is preferable for the findings of work groups to be made public *within* sharing groups. These may be formed by combining:

- one representative from each of four different work groups
- two students from one work group with two from another
- one or two students from three different work groups
- two work groups.

Our decisions on groupings for the presentation stage will depend on the task and the concepts and skills we wish to develop. In many cases, we can rearrange groups to achieve other goals, such as mixing groups of boys with girls, or less capable students with more capable ones.

As the students present the outcomes of their work, we are able to check whether they have learned what was intended, and monitor what else they have come to understand through the process. Thus, presentation can be a three-fold stage: showing what has been learned; exposing what is still uncertain; and revealing what is still to be learned. From this point, we as teachers decide whether to move the students on to reflection and closure, or back to exploration and transformation. And if there is a need for further teacher input, the cycle may go back to the engagement stage, from which point the model is worked through once again.

As we explain in more detail in Chapter 7, presentation is the most appropriate stage for assessment, as students are asked to use written, spoken or multimedia texts to communicate what they have learned. On the way to presentation, the informal or non-standard language of the home group has been gradually refined by participation in a work group assigned to transform it to meet the demands of the task. Presentation requires a further refinement: the language becomes much more formal and precise when it needs to communicate understanding and knowledge.

Of course, student work and learning outcomes can be presented to wider audiences such as other classes, the whole school, parents and members of the community.

Reflection

This is the final stage in the planning model. We believe that reflection plays an invaluable part in learning, but that it is very often forgotten or left out when we are rushed for time because of interruptions or because tasks take longer than we anticipate. We can ask our students to reflect on their learning in many different ways, however. Like exploratory talk, reflection does not need to take up much time at all. Just as we need to *make time* for exploratory talk, we need to ensure that there is time for reflection in each learning cycle. If this doesn't happen, our students cannot make clear to themselves what it is that they have learned.

In the process of reflection, students gain a deeper understanding of both the content and the learning process that they have worked with. This should inform their future learning experiences.

Classroom learning can involve both individual and collaborative reflection. Simply reminding our students what they have done during a school day, and asking home groups to come up with 'one new thing that they have learned today' is an easy whole-class reflection activity as they pack up for home and wait to be dismissed. This can be done individually as well, or at the start of the next day as a new engagement stage commences.

Over time, students can learn to ask themselves:

- What have I learned?
- How is it important to me as a student?
- How does this connect with what I've learned before?
- Have I done what I set out to do?
- What do I need to learn next?
- What did I think of the learning process?
- In what ways can I improve my own learning?

Asking students to reflect upon what and how they have learned also helps the teacher to monitor the learning program, and to plan further activities. Of course, reflection on the process can and should occur at the exploration and transformation stages, and following presentation.

As we explain in more detail in Chapter 8, by focusing attention on (and indicating the value of) reflection, teachers can encourage a working atmosphere in the classroom, as students take increasing responsibility for their own learning.

The planning model in the classroom: An example

Let's now look at a sequence that might be followed in planning a single segment of a lesson where the teaching purpose is to begin a unit of work on writing narrative text with Year 6 students.

- *Engagement:* teacher reads the first page and a half of Betsy Byars' *The Pinballs* to the class.
- *Exploration:* teacher asks the students to talk for two minutes in their home groups about what they have just heard, and what they know about families who foster children.
- *Transformation:* teacher asks the students to try to predict what will happen to one of the characters they have just heard about (two groups allocated to each character).
- *Presentation:* each group shares its predictions with the other group who thought about the same character.
- *Reflection:* in the sharing group, students make a judgement about the most likely outcomes for the three main characters in this novel.

From this point, the teacher might continue reading the novel, knowing that the students have a reason to keep listening and thinking about what she is reading.

Engagement

As you will note, the simple ten-minute sequence set out above involves every stage of the planning cycle. Yet it is possible to see this sequence as just the *engagement* stage for the remainder of the lesson, as in the following diagram (Fig. 4.2).

Figure 4.2: *The planning model as a cycle within a cycle*

Exploration

When the teacher finishes reading two more chapters, she will allow the students time to *explore* the text again — talking about their predictions, responding to what has happened, and so on. She might conclude this phase by asking the students what type of text this book is, and how they know. This requires them to surface and revise knowledge about narrative from previous years. She might continue by explaining what their work will be aimed at achieving in terms of their further learning about narrative, and what she wants them to achieve: by the end of the week; and in the next lesson.

The teacher's task is to make a *sense of direction* explicit for students. She explains that they are to move to their reading work groups (which are based on reading ability) to focus on how Byars has used forms of language common to narrative texts in the opening to her novel. The focus here is on how writers of narrative text:

- use descriptive language
- arrange events in a sequence
- use the past tense of verbs
- use pronouns as internal linking devices between sentences.

Each student receives a copy of Chapter 1 to work from.

Transformation

Each reading work group now receives its *transformation* task. The two most able groups are given the task of highlighting all the adjectives Betsy Byars uses to describe her characters in this orientation to her narrative, and then jointly rewriting the text using alternate adjectives or adjectival phrases with a similar meaning. Two other groups are asked to turn their copies of the text into cloze passages: one group is to remove adverbial connective words and phrases that sequence the text; the other is to remove the verbs. The least able group will work with the teacher in a guided reading session focused on the links between sentences through the use of pronouns. This group will be asked to remove the pronouns from the text by scoring them out as a cloze passage.

It is easy to see that these transformation tasks promote questioning and interaction between members of the work groups. It is also clear that the tasks must be ones the teacher feels are achievable by the most able group members 'at a stretch' (an intellectual stretch), and by the less able with assistance from their peers. Although they will all have individual 'products' at the end of the transformation session, the students need to work together to ensure that they are accomplishing the task correctly.

Presentation

In this case, the teacher might plan to have the work groups form two sorts of sharing groups for presentation. The three groups who have prepared cloze passages (say 12+ students) could form into groups of three, with each sharing group containing one person from a different work group. The group members could pass around and complete one of the cloze

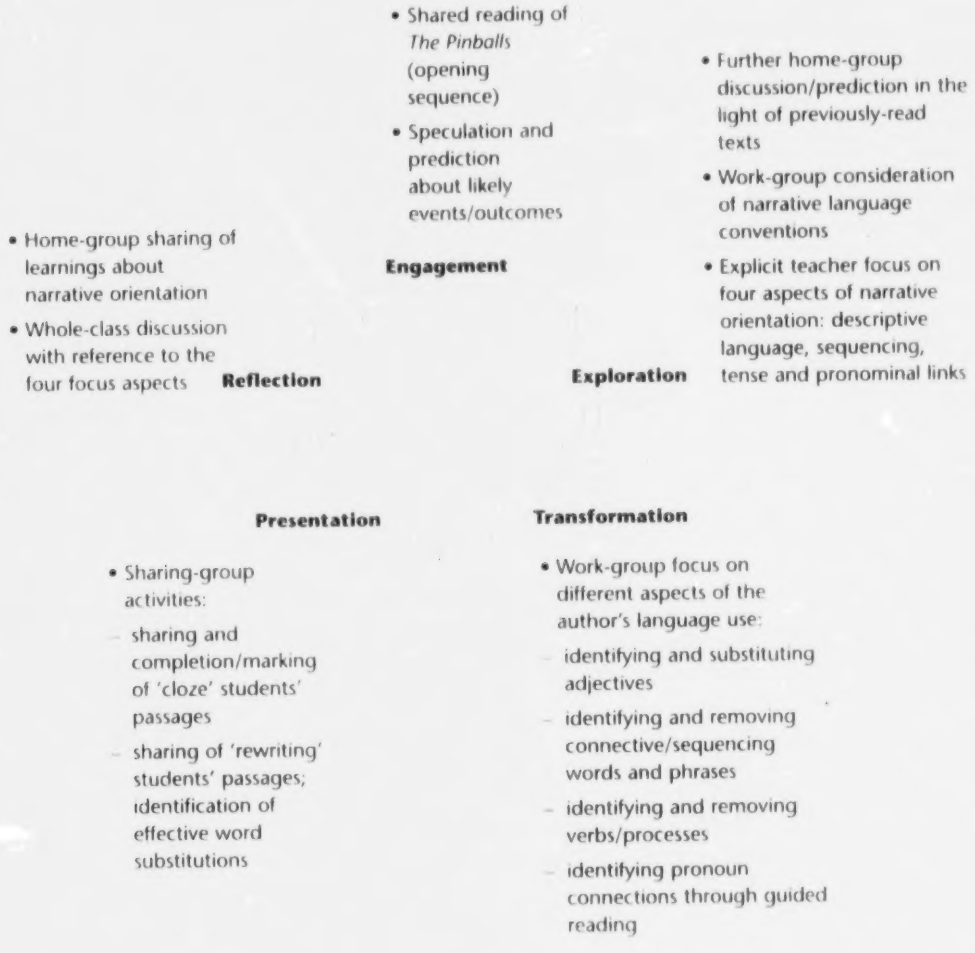
activities before the three are 'marked' by their makers. The four groups who have been working to rewrite the passage could from four new groups, each again containing one person from a different work group. These groups could then read the rewritten versions and make a note of the words and phrases that stand out as most effective.

Reflection

The *reflection* stage will be very brief. Students return to their home groups and briefly share with their friends the key points that they learned about writing a narrative orientation. This is followed by a whole-class discussion reviewing the four things the teacher wanted the students to learn from the lesson.

The complete lesson sequence is summarised in Fig. 4.3.

Figure 4.3: *Summary of the lesson sequence for a lesson on narrative orientation*


• Shared reading of *The Pinballs* (opening sequence)
• Speculation and prediction about likely events/outcomes
Engagement
• Further home-group discussion/prediction in the light of previously-read texts
• Work-group consideration of narrative language conventions
• Explicit teacher focus on four aspects of narrative orientation: descriptive language, sequencing, tense and pronominal links
Exploration
• Home-group sharing of learnings about narrative orientation
• Whole-class discussion with reference to the four focus aspects
Reflection
Presentation
• Sharing-group activities:
– sharing and completion/marking of 'cloze' students' passages
– sharing of 'rewriting' students' passages; identification of effective word substitutions
Transformation
• Work-group focus on different aspects of the author's language use:
– identifying and substituting adjectives
– identifying and removing connective/sequencing words and phrases
– identifying and removing verbs/processes
– identifying pronoun connections through guided reading

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A summary of the planning model

All classroom action should be planned to ensure that students have time for:

Engagement

Students acquire information and share an experience that provides the content of their ensuing learning. As a result, students have common ground on which to base their learning.

Exploration

Having encountered new information, students now have the chance to explore it for themselves. Though apparently unstructured, this is a vital stage that must be built into the learning process. It is a transition between the engagement and transformation stages, during which no task is set by the teacher.

Transformation

Students focus their attention on the aspect of the information that represents the desired outcomes of the learning activity. The teacher intervenes at need, explicitly asking the students to use or to work with information in order to move towards a closer understanding of it.

Presentation

Students present their findings to an interested and critical audience, explaining or elaborating upon what they have learned. This requirement provides a degree of tension and a sense of purpose to the work done throughout the prior stages. The feedback students receive at this stage enables them to assess how successful their work has been.

Reflection

Students look back at what they have learned, and the process they have gone through. Their deepening understanding of both learning content and learning processes supports their future work and increases their sense of ownership over their own learning.

The diagram over (Fig. 4.4) shows how we see classroom organisation at each of these stages.

***Figure 4.4**: Classroom organisation at each of the five stages of the planning model. Adapted from Reid, J, Forrestal, P & Cook, J (1989) 'Small Group Learning in the Classroom'. Chalkface Press, Scarborough, WA and Primary English Teaching Association, Sydney.*

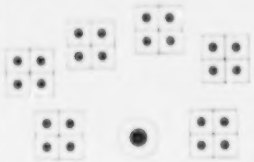
Engagement	Exploration	Transformation	Presentation	Reflection
The teacher:	The teacher:	The teacher:	The teacher:	The teacher:
• encourages reflection	• supports development of group skills	• recalls directions	• generates an atmosphere of performance by explicitly valuing work	• reviews the products and outcomes of learning
• reviews progress	• provides time for students to make links with new information	• sets tasks	• ensures products relate to the task's purpose and audience	• reviews the learning process
• points to further directions	• provides direction through open-ended questioning	• organises the classroom appropriately	• organises the classroom appropriately	• shows enthusiasm and disappointment
• poses organising questions	• monitors small-group talk	• reviews constraints	• encourages audience response	• encourages student self-evaluation of progress
• encourages prediction and speculation	• reflects on information gained from monitoring.	• supports language skills	• encourages sharing of products	• organises the classroom to enable individual writing, small-group talk and whole-class discussion
• presents new content		• directs students to best resources	• supports development of presentation skills	• re-establishes links between the task and the whole curriculum
• links new content with old		• monitors students' progress and understanding	• evaluates products in terms of goals.	• solicits student ideas on follow-up activities/directions
• provides a structured overview		• monitors quality of work produced		• reflects upon all this for future planning.
• demonstrates or models new skills		• provides information at need (recycling the engagement and exploration stages)		
		• records student progress.		

most often used

least often used

Engagement

- whole class



- small group

- pair

- individual

Exploration

- small group

- pair

- individual (exploratory writing)

Transformation

- small group

- pair

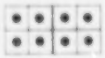
- individual

Presentation

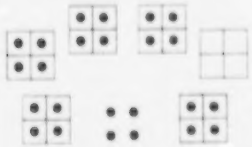
- larger group

- reconstituted small group

- combined groups



- whole class



- wider audience

- individual to small group

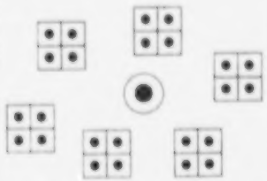
Reflection

- small group

- pair

- individual

- whole class (discussion)



Context determines classroom structure

Planning small-group work involves thinking about three important questions:

- Why should I use small groups?
- When should I use small groups (and when should I not use them)?
- How should I use small-group work?

Programming is very much a decision-making process through which we determine how best to help our students learn in the classroom. There is a conventional set of questions to be considered in determining a work program:

Why?	What is significant for my students and me about these goals?
How?	How are we going to do it?
When?	In what order are we going to do it?
Who?	Who is doing — and needs to do — what?
What?	What resources are we going to use?
For whom?	Who is our audience?
Where from?	How does this work connect with what we've done before?
Where to?	Where could we go from here?
How well?	What is the quality of our learning?

It is the relationship *between* these factors that determines the effectiveness of the program in action, of course. It is not just a matter of deciding to use small groups for this or that activity. The decision to employ small-group work is one answer to the 'How are we going to do it?' question. But the effectiveness and appropriateness of small groups depend upon a complex interplay with the other factors.

The answers to these questions determine the *context* for small-group work. Within our particular (and unique) teaching contexts, the planning model provides a stable support for this very complex and creative process. At each stage of the movement from engagement to reflection, students are involved in very different processes — which, in turn, require varying classroom structures and settings.

Exploring a new idea is not the same process as *presenting* a known idea; *engaging* with information is not the same as *transforming* it and applying it to a new problem, and so on. Different pieces of content may require different learning strategies; different stages of the learning model certainly do. In other words, how we teach something will determine what is learned as much as the content being studied.

A concrete illustration makes the point.

> A Year 4 class is programmed to study a science unit on the planet Earth in the solar system. The teacher begins the unit by talking briefly about Earth being in space, with the sun visible by day and the moon and stars by night. He poses some questions that the class will answer through the unit of study. For this *engagement* session, the class is a single group, facing the teacher at the whiteboard.
>
> Why whole-class work now, for this activity? Because the teacher needs to give the same information to all the students, at the same time, and they don't need to be interacting. Individually but collectively, they are just receiving.
>
> The teacher now asks the class to work in their home groups of four, to talk and make their own notes about what they already know of Earth in the solar system, and the relationship between the Earth, moon and sun.
>
> Why home groups now, for this activity? Because the students need to generate ideas and reflect on their current state of knowledge. Interaction is called for because it generates a wider range of ideas. All the students can participate actively. They are not teacher-dependent. Along the way they will become curious and uncertain, and perhaps even disagree with each other — all of which stimulates their intention to learn. They will also deal with some of the questions that arise from their investigations, particularly when they each carry different knowledge of the subject (students are great teachers of other students!). The topic, which begins as the teacher's, becomes theirs, too.
>
> The whole-class group could not possibly achieve all this equally well. Nor could each student working alone, in silence, at a desk.

And so it goes on. The point is that different processes and settings produce different learning outcomes, even with the same material.

Questions to be considered when planning

We believe that the best approach to planning is to work backwards. First, we should consider the desired outcomes (always in students' learning terms) and then ask ourselves which processes and settings will best help the students achieve those outcomes. There is a significant difference between an approach that asks 'What do I want to teach my class?' and one that asks 'What learning outcomes do I want my students to achieve?'. That difference is the crucial one of *how to get there*.

The teacher unused to small-group work in the classroom will inevitably have to confront certain questions. The combination of the learning model and the small-group processes recommended in this book should enable the teacher to deal constructively with such questions as:

- When should I plan to intervene in small-group work and address the whole class?
- When do the students shift from the whole-class group to home groups to sharing groups and so on?
- Which activities work best in small groups?
- If the class is in small groups, how can I get all the students to the same end point, and at the same time?
- How can all the students make a presentation to others, without it taking forever or becoming hugely boring and repetitive?
- When is it more efficient and effective in learning terms to talk to the whole class?
- How can I generate more time and opportunity to work with students on a one-to-one basis, without losing the rest of the class or holding them up?

If teachers understand what small groups can do, they should be able to answer these questions and then make decisions on the appropriate classroom structure at each stage of the learning model.

Goals

Programming for learning in small groups involves establishing both process goals and content goals.

Process goals

As teachers, we are aiming to build certain attributes that set the tone or character of the community of practice within the classroom, so that everybody who works together in the room knows how to behave and interact harmoniously. Important goals are those such as courtesy, honesty, high standards of work, respect for others, encouragement of curiosity, acceptance of individual differences and enjoyment in learning. These somewhat intangible goals cannot be taken for granted. The classroom as community will be built up over time, but it needs to be worked at, and towards, constantly.

We need to take account of the processes of learning that operate in our classrooms, and to program specific activities that will help students to learn these processes. Then students will be able to learn, without hindrance, the content material that we want to teach. In a classroom operating on the principles of small-group learning, the teacher should begin the year with a program designed to develop students' understandings about small-group work, using ideas such as those described in Chapters 6–8.

Our students come to learn effectively in small groups only by participating in small-group work. At the end of this chapter we provide an excerpt from a program for an early-years

class. Here the teacher mixes individual, small-group and whole-class activities as she gets to know her students and begins to construct with them the classroom community that she is hoping will prove most beneficial for all their learning.

Content goals

The long-term content goals of any program are generally determined by the teacher. These goals are for the most part prescriptive, and can be seen as a statement of overall intention on the part of the teacher, the subject department (in some middle schools) or the primary school. The program, then, is an expression of the teacher's attempt to help students achieve these outcomes.

Short-term process goals and the content aims of individual units of work should be clearly stated within the framework of long-term goals, but they need not be rigid. As long as the teacher has a clear idea of the desired outcomes by the end of a unit, term and year, then the freedom to alter, adapt or even scrap a particular program can be enjoyed and utilised.

As we noted in the previous section, the *process* of learning determines student outcomes as much as the content or aims. As students develop their understandings of small-group work over time, process considerations have a tendency to modify short-term aims and objectives.

Teachers may find, for example, that the small-group activities they have planned take longer than expected, or take different directions from those anticipated, or lead students away from the intended goal. In these cases, it is up to the classroom teacher to decide whether to intervene and guide students back to the planned path. Sometimes we decide to follow the direction of the students. This is quite appropriate, so long as the desired outcomes are still met. Decisions about the sorts of evidence that we choose to use as indicators of student achievement are up to us as professionals.

Evaluating the work accomplished, and revising programs to record changes that have occurred, will ensure that the short-term goals of any particular program are not overlooked and that long-term goals are reached.

Catering for the needs of individual students

The specific needs, interests or abilities of students can be taken into account when programming for small groups. Indeed the small-group situation makes it easier for teachers to help less able students, and those who present challenging behaviours. It provides room for students to follow their particular interests, and allows for extension of more capable students. Of course, it is essential that teachers prepare lessons carefully to ensure that students are given tasks suitable to their abilities, needs and interests*. The time that we spend reflecting on and planning for teaching is the only real opportunity we have to evaluate and build on the interrelationship of individual activities to make a coherent program.

* PETA's monograph 'Ways with Community Knowledge' (Nelson, 2001) sets out units that tap into students' interests and home discourses.

If students' learning is to develop over a school year, the progress of the overall program must be carefully monitored. This means that we need to review and reflect on the ways in which the planned and unplanned work of the classroom has led to the desired short-term and long-term learning outcomes.

This is particularly the case when individual students are facing difficulties. The teacher may need to provide one-to-one attention and support, which can be programmed in advance. In this way we find that planning for small-group learning often allows us to make better use of the classroom time provided by learning support staff.

Planning for small-group interaction

'Working backwards' when programming also allows us to plan more efficient small-group interaction. For instance, a decision about a particular form of presentation will often dictate the way in which groups are arranged. A whole-class presentation, for example, will mean that all members of the class need to be free to work, listen and respond at the same time. The teacher needs to have planned carefully so that this will happen.

A presentation by one group to another — whether the work is in progress or in completed form — need not interrupt the rest of the class if the teacher has planned for it and the timing and classroom movement are expected. Similarly, when students are presenting their work to audiences from outside the classroom, the teacher must plan for the considerable amount of organisation and preparation that is often required beforehand.

During transformation activities, students may want particular resources and equipment, and the teacher must plan for their likely needs. This type of planning increases the efficiency of the classroom. At this stage, too — as students work towards making new information part of their own knowledge — they will often need incidental help, and so the teacher must also plan to be available to give it.

Optimising time

Time is vital dimension of successful small-group learning. If students do not have enough time, they cannot engage in the necessary exploration. If they are under too much pressure, they are unlikely to complete transformation or presentation tasks effectively. When students feel they do not have enough time, and are worried about completing the task in the set period, the working of the small group may suffer.

However, if students have too much time to complete a task, they are tempted to waste it. Teachers and students will learn to use and allocate time more efficiently as they become more experienced in small-group work. In the early stages particularly, it is wise to employ clear tasks to be done in a comparatively short time.

Allowing optimum time for task completion is one of the most difficult issues that teachers face when managing small groups. There is no easy answer. The teacher needs to monitor carefully what is happening as the groups progress through the various stages of learning.

Generally, however, it is a question of time being reorganised. It may well be that students need abundant time in the earlier stages of the learning process, but not as much in the later stages. For example, students who have spent time exploring and talking about a new problem in mathematics will find that they need less time to practise different examples of the problem, because their understanding has developed at the earlier stage. At the very least, if students become engaged, repetition and revision will become less necessary.

When weighing up the amount of time small-group work seems to take in comparison with teacher instruction, it is worth reflecting on the *quality* of learning and the difference between teaching as *telling* and teaching as *managing* student learning. Forty minutes of activity which provokes significant student learning is very much more efficient than 30 minutes of instruction which leads to very little effective learning.

What also needs to be remembered is that movement between home groups and sharing groups takes longer at the start of each year, when a class is still getting used to working in small groups, or when small-group work is only used now and then. However, as students acquire habits of regular movement between groups, and recognise the reasons for sharing or returning to home groups, it does not take long for this movement to become automatic, purposeful and, sometimes, even quiet.

Allowing for flexibility and change

The teaching–learning program is not just a blueprint for action. It is a representation of our ideas and theory. Planning for student learning should ensure that the teacher knows where the curriculum is heading and how the work is to be covered. And having engaged in thoughtful planning, the teacher should feel confident enough to change or adapt the program as circumstances require.

A program may sometimes seem to be unsuccessful because of faults in its construction: students may not have been given enough direction; the resources may prove inadequate; the time allowed may turn out to be too much or too little. On the other hand, students may develop a spontaneous interest in something unexpected, or a new book shortlisted for Children's Book of the Year might suggest a worthwhile topic for further investigation. In all such cases, the teacher should feel free to intervene and diverge from the planned program to cater for any unforeseen difficulties or to build on any unexpected interest.

When such divergences occur, the planning model provides structure and reassurance that quality student learning can continue, and that 'interruptions' and 'diversions' to our best-laid plans are often (as in life outside school) more rewarding and interesting than the prepared path. 'Post-programming' (altering the program after the event) is useful for reflecting on and evaluating the quality of classroom learning, and for providing direction for future planning.

A sample early-years integrated program developing small-group skills

From a composite Kindergarten / Year 1 classroom

Cycle 1

Engagement: Revise song 'Where is Thumbkin?'. Point out how fingers are like a family — alike but different: *Our new unit of work is on 'Me and My Family'. We'll learn about each other — help me get to know you all properly.* Whole-class discussion: *How are families alike?*

– *They share a name? (Not always; whose doesn't?)*

– *They share a house? (Not always; whose doesn't?)*

– *They care about each other?*

Exploration: Students tell partners which finger is like them in their family (tall one, short one, middle one etc.). *We are all important in our family, and that's where we'll start our unit on families — with us!*

Transformation: Partner work: teacher writes sentence on board: 'I am an important item in my family'. Read sentence. Together, to partner, individuals read aloud.

Individual handwriting activity: students copy from board after teacher models underneath or 'tracing' over in different colour.

Whole-class phonic instruction and play with sound of letter 'I'. *Show me I that says [long] 'I'* (capital I, i in 'item'). *What other sound does the letter 'I' make?* (short i — 'in', 'important', 'family'). *Any other short/long 'i' sounds in our names?*

Presentation: Read sentence again — in chorus, to a partner, in response to questions: *Who's an important item? What are you in your family?* etc. — pointing to words in handwriting books, emphasising 'i' sounds.

Reflection: *Let's see how this little boy is important in his family.* Read *Titch* by Rosemary Wells. Discuss the story.

Cycle 2

Engagement: Reread *Titch*. Summarise the main idea: Titch is the littlest but he is still important in his family. Model writing on whiteboard, sounding and playing with short 'i' sound.

Exploration: Students recount the story to partners.

Transformation: Students move to their home groups, write the recounted story in their workbooks and draw a picture. Teacher works with today's guided reading groups.

Presentation: Students hold up their pictures, then read their recounts to the group.

Reflection: Individuals tell each reader in their group one good thing about the recount.

Cycle 3

Engagement: Teacher models drawing an outline around a body shape by tracing her/his own feet at the bottom of a sheet. Students estimate the amount of paper needed to complete the outline.

Exploration: Groups of three (different-sized) students estimate the paper needed for each of them.

Transformation: Students draw around each other's bodies and arrange the drawings in height from tallest to shortest.

Presentation: Students lay out their drawings with appropriate card labels. Two groups come together to show each other their work.

Reflection: Teacher-led whole-class discussion of how groups went: *Who was a good co-operator? Who listened well? Listen now, everybody, and tell your partner what you think: If we changed your groups around so that you were in sharing groups of six, would everyone stay tallest, shortest or middle-sized?*

Cycle 4

Engagement: Teacher models painting clothes onto his/her body outline.

Exploration: Students remind group members about rules for artwork, and what they might need to remember when they are doing this activity.

Transformation: Students use paint/crayon to draw appropriate clothing onto their outlines to create a realistic picture: *Make this look like you.*

Presentation: Teacher pins cut-out figures to walls around the class. Students write their names on cards as a label. Each stands and describes his/her clothing. Class identifies that student's figure. Student puts label onto his/her figure.

Reflection: In pairs: *Tell your partner what the other people in your family wear to school/work or at home.*

Cycle 5

Engagement: 'Thumbkin' song. Teacher chooses a group of 3–4 figure outlines on the wall. Class decides which are tallest and shortest, and which are middle-sized. *Think about your own family; imagine them all lined up like this.*

Exploration: Students tell partners: *Who is the shortest person in your family? Who is the tallest? Who are in the middle? Who is the tallest of the ones in the middle?*

Transformation: Students draw all the people in their family on one page and label them with names. *Tell home-group members about your family members.*

Presentation: Form sharing groups in jigsaw movement. Students present work and tell group about the people in their family. Teacher collects.

Reflection: Individual thinking: *Are there any other people in your family (who care for you) that you have not drawn?* Whole-class discussion: teacher records contributions (e.g. grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles).

Cycle 6

Engagement: Teacher reads *My Granny* by Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas. Discuss body shapes and sizes: *Who is the fattest? Thinnest? Tallest? Shortest?* (of the grannies).

Exploration: Partner work: *Tell partners about your grannies. Who doesn't have a granny? A grandpa?*

Transformation: Home-group discussion: *What different names for grandparents do you have in your group?* Students brainstorm list.

Presentation: Groups read list to whole class. Teacher scribes. Class reads the list aloud together. Students write sentence: 'My nan's name is [name]'.

Reflection: Teacher reads *My Granny* again, with students reading along. *What words do you now know?*

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Cycle 7

Engagement: Teacher rereads *Titch* and *My Granny* together with the class.

Exploration: Review teaching points from last week: long i in 'my', 'I'; short i in 'Titch', 'big'.

Transformation: Collect long-i and short-i words that we know — a sound family. Chart and display the collected words.

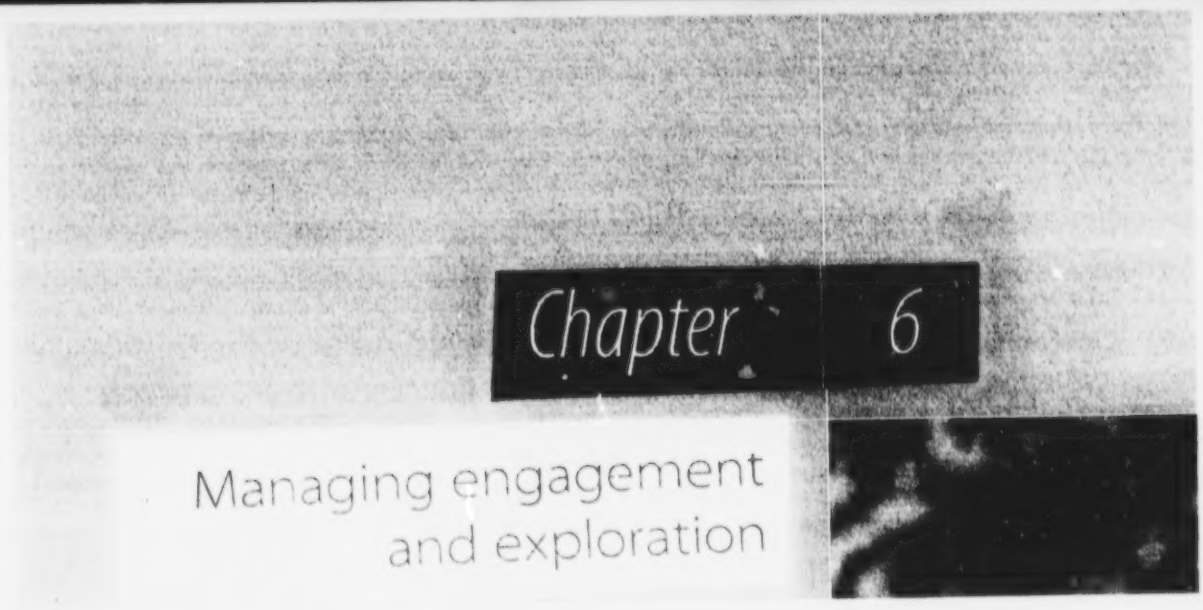
Presentation: Students read words from the chart.

Reflection: *How can we use this chart when we write?*

References and sources

Hayes, D, Lingard, B & Mills, M (2000) 'Productive Pedagogies'. *Education Links* No. 60. http://138.25.75.110/personal/dhayes/Education_Links.html

Nelson, G (2001) 'Ways with Community Knowledge'. *PEN* 128. Primary English Teaching Association, Sydney.



Chapter 6

Managing engagement and exploration

Students work effectively in small groups when they believe that their work has a purpose and when the small-group structure is appropriate to the task. *Simply arranging the classroom furniture into groups will not result in effective group work.* Like adults, students like to talk, and a group of students sitting together will generally do just that. But the kind of talk that takes place, and its quality, will depend upon the students' perceptions and acceptance of the purpose of their talking together.

In this chapter we share some of the key features involved in managing the *engagement* and *exploration* stages of students' learning — getting them interested and prepared to work. We focus mainly on our own role as teachers in the effective classroom management of small-group learning during these phases.

Purposeful small-group talk is likely to occur when:

- the classroom atmosphere encourages co-operative learning
- students have appropriate time to complete activities
- students are required to make their findings public.

The engagement stage of a lesson (or a unit of work) is the time when we as teachers set up the expectations, parameters, and ways of speaking and thinking that will govern subsequent practice.

Managing engagement

While classroom atmosphere is something that develops over the year, it is important *from the outset* that teachers show by the physical organisation of the classroom, and by their own words and actions, that small-group talk is a valuable part of the learning process within the classroom community.

The physical organisation of the classroom tells our students (and their parents) a lot about our beliefs and values as teachers. There are some things that we have no control over in terms of our physical environment, like the layout of storage facilities, computer network access points, doors, walls and windows. How we organise our students' desks, though, is still pretty much up to us. It is easy to see how the engagement stage of a lesson might differ across classrooms in which furniture has been arranged in different ways.

We have advocated small groups of four as the basic organisational units of the classroom. These groups need to be set up so that all students, when seated, can easily see the teacher and the board at the front of the room. Eye contact is essential when we are talking to anyone, and we need to ensure that we can easily make contact with each student in the class at times when we want to speak to them as individual members of the whole class.

In classrooms where the teacher wants the whole class seated as a group together 'on the mat' (as in the example at the end of Chapter 5), engagement sessions are generally focused directly on the teacher sitting on his chair or next to his easel. In such settings, students can more easily be given directions.

Engagement experiences typically involve the teacher in communicating to the whole class. However, students should be organised in ways that allow for periods of subsequent exploratory talk. In classes of older students, students can mostly remain in home groups for engagement sessions, so that the instructions for subsequent and interspersed periods of exploratory talk can be given without the need for student movement.

Working with small groups can also help teachers to overcome some of the problems they face when dealing with a whole class, such as talking too much, making all the decisions for students, or questioning inefficiently.

The role of the teacher during engagement

When we think (or ask our students) about what makes a good teacher, enthusiasm and knowledge about what is being taught are always mentioned, along with 'fairness', a sense of humour and the ability to keep order. At the start of every year, term, week and day — and even at the beginning of each session in the classroom — most of us as teachers attempt to provide an 'upbeat', enthusiastic introduction to the work that students will be doing together as a class. This is our effort to arouse a sympathetic interest in the topics and activities we will be doing. But it is seldom enough to *sustain* student interest unless we have also been able to arouse an intellectual curiosity or a sense of real *purpose* for the work of the classroom.

When introducing or students to a new poem, picture book or other literary work, for instance, it is essential that the first encounter with the text is both exciting and dramatic. We must present the material in a way that will *ignite* interest, response, connection with our students' own lives. We cannot expect them to pick this up from nowhere.

For this reason, our role in the engagement stage of any lesson or unit is crucial. In presenting new content material, we need always to plan our introductions and scene-setting carefully so that we have the best chance of engaging our students' attention and interest. Typically, teacher talk at the engagement stage is a *performance*. We draw on our interpersonal and language skills to show our own enthusiasm, curiosity and interest in the new topic, and to demonstrate the important links between where the classroom learning has been and where it is heading. This is the age-old skill of making connections between the known and the unknown, and reminding learners of how new material links with old.

What we are attempting to do at this stage of the learning cycle is to:

- link unknown material with known
- encourage prediction and hypothesising
- provide a structured overview
- demonstrate or model new skills
- present new content material
- encourage reflection
- review progress so far
- point to further directions
- pose organising questions.

Sometimes we plan to vary the first engagement by using a video or an excursion. Taking a Year 3 class on a simple 'print walk' around the school office might be an effective way of introducing them to (or reminding them of the functions of) procedural and informational texts. Taking Year 4s around the school grounds might serve better than teacher talk to introduce a topic about native and introduced tree species.

At other times, we may find that as we monitor the exploratory talk of the classroom, we are able to see that several students have forgotten (or never learned) some important prior information needed to make sense of the new material. Similarly, we may discover, during the transformation stage, that one or two students need some further teacher instruction in order to successfully complete the task and achieve the learning outcomes.

Fig. 4.4 (pp 52–3) shows that practically, most of the time in school, the engagement stage is planned with the teacher interacting with the whole class or the whole class engaging in some form of teacher-planned activity.

However, there are times when teacher input for engagement or re-engagement is directed to one or two home or work groups, a pair of students, or an individual. For instance, it might be necessary for the teacher to provide a short review lesson on the formation of the letter 'p' for just two members of one work group, or to two work groups in the class. On these occasions it is pointless to disrupt the other students. Asking the whole class to attend as we demonstrate on the board is not only a distraction to them, it is a waste of their time. When particular learners have become disengaged from the task because of concept difficulties or lack of skills, the teacher's input should focus on enabling those learners to re-engage with the task.

Evaluating teaching for student engagement

Later in this book (Chapter 8), we explain that students should have an opportunity to reflect on their learning at various stages of the teaching–learning cycle. Likewise, it is useful for us to reflect on our *teaching* at different stages of the cycle. Reviewing how our plans are working in practice, as we go, is part of our routine, and we adjust and 'tweak' our programs in response to our students' behaviour.

The following questions are grouped to highlight the *content* and *process* issues that place demands on us as teachers aiming for optimum student engagement.

Content concerns

- Are my goals clear?
- Do I know exactly what I want the students to learn?
- Are my students aware of the goals and desired outcomes?
- Are students encouraged to ask questions about what they are learning and why they are learning it?
- Have I been able to adjust resources to reflect the community in which we live?

Process concerns

- Have I provided enough information — and made sure that the shared experience will provide enough? Is there too much information for the students to process?
- Have I developed a logical sequence for the understandings involved?
- Is the information I have prepared clearly expressed, well organised, and easy to comprehend? Is it logical? Can they read it? Are new or difficult terms introduced? Is it presented in the best possible way? Do I need diagrams, a video or other illustrations?
- Have I provided suitable resources?
- Are all students able to see, hear, and take part in activities that are part of the engagement session?
- How will I deal with any behaviour problems that I can predict?

After Reid, J, Forrestal, P & Cook, J (1989) 'Small Group Learning in the Classroom'. Chalkface Press, Scarborough, WA and Primary English Teaching Association, Sydney.

Managing exploration

Our students must feel that they are responsible for making a contribution to their own learning. As such, we as teachers need to show that we value their language as a learning tool. In particular, we need to provide opportunities for interactions that enable the often vague and tentative language used by students as they co-construct their knowledge. As their understandings develop, students should be asked to move towards more explicit 'public' language to articulate and communicate what they know. Technical or subject-specific language can become part of a learners' working vocabulary only if its meaning is understood. This is why the *exploration* stage is so important; it gives learners time to 'come to' know new skills and information in an explicit sense.

Of course, it may not be easy to convince some students that the instruction to 'talk about' new information is worthy of their careful attention and thought. But students realise very quickly, if it is pointed out to them, that their talk *does* in fact help them to understand better. Therefore, teachers who value student talk need to say that they do. And they need to prove that they do by allowing students to stop and talk among themselves about, say, questions asked of the whole class, a difficult word met in a textbook, or a sample mathematical problem on the board.

Teachers who stop to give students five minutes to clarify what has just been said have little trouble convincing them that talk is valuable. This is especially the case if we *explain* why we are encouraging talk at this time, or if we give the students an opportunity to reflect on how the talking has helped to clarify their thinking. Similarly, the teacher who *thinks aloud* for the class when trying to explain something is modelling very useful learning behaviour. Thinking aloud about a number of possible spellings of a word that we are writing on the board, or making a tentative guess at estimating the result of a problem, can teach an important lesson: that in a learning community of practice, it is okay to make mistakes, and to keep trying until we get something refined. Explaining the reasoning behind our guesses helps to convince and model to students how they, too, might offer tentative thoughts and ideas to the small group.

Preparing for exploratory talk

If students are given the opportunity to think (or write) for themselves for a few moments before small-group discussion begins, they have a moment to focus on the task at hand. This pre-talk activity is generally non-threatening; for example, students might make personal notes to jog their memories rather than formal communications to a critical audience.

This is not a strategy for every occasion but, used thoughtfully, it can be extremely useful for focusing talk. Making exploratory notes before a discussion ensures that all group members have thought about the topic beforehand, and have something to contribute. For younger students, the teacher will need to model and demonstrate the use of *key words* rather than fuller notes, so that almost from the time they start school, young learners are attempting to use writing and reading as an aid to their thinking, talk and learning.

Chapter 8

Managing reflection

For students to become independent learners, it is essential that they become aware of how they learn. Time for reflection and discussion with each other allows for this.

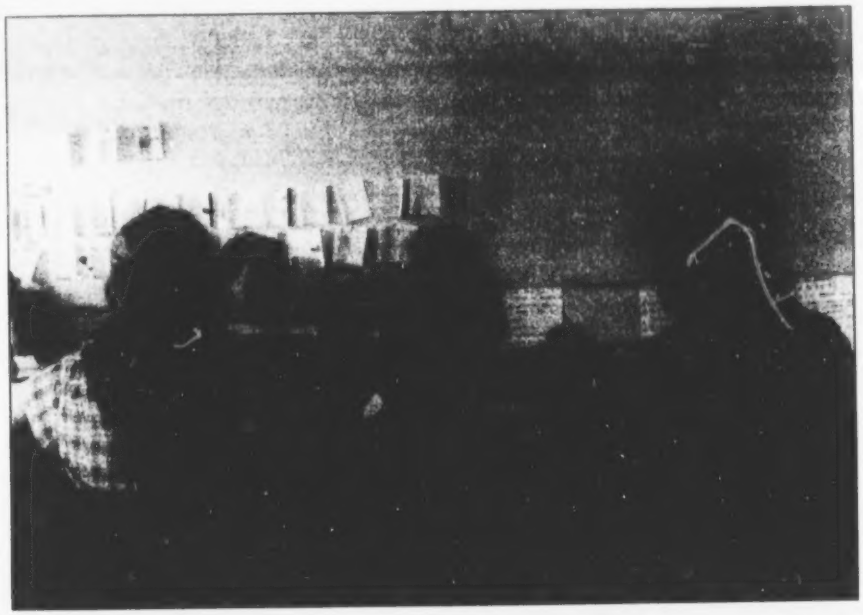
Learning about learning requires *planned* evaluation by both teacher and students. As a planned stage in the teaching–learning cycle, reflection plays an important role in helping students develop as learners and in helping teachers improve the structure of the learning process. However, as we have noted in Chapters 6 and 7, reflection is an ongoing process that occurs during each of the other stages as well. As teachers we are often unaware of how *much* evaluation is going on as we continually note the progress or problems of particular students and the success or otherwise of our own actions, resource materials, lessons or units of work. This is the sort of 'reflection in action' that Grundy (1995) talks about as part of regular teaching practice. According to the results of these on-the-spot evaluations, we are continually changing, adapting, redirecting, rephrasing or reteaching as the needs of the class demand.

While the reflection stage provides a means for us to plan for this type of evaluation, we should also encourage reflection when a group is having difficulty or is not displaying the common social courtesies that form the most basic rules for all small-group participation. At the start of the year, it may be necessary to intervene in transformation and presentation activities to highlight these process concerns. At this point, our focus might prioritise management over learning. We should aim to shift this priority over time.

Our role in nurturing our students as reflective learners involves *modelling* reflective practice. Such practice might involve simply telling the class at the end of the day: "Now we can see quite clearly that in the morning, when it was cool and everybody was feeling fresh, we worked much better than after the PE lesson this afternoon. Next week, if it's as hot as this, I might swap our after-lunch reading to after PE, so that people can concentrate on the work *before* you get all hot and bothered." This not only defuses tensions at the end of a difficult period, but conveys a commitment to the work that the students are doing, and a willingness

Young students can also be guided to richer exploration by being asked to *think* about the input we have provided, and then *tell* their partner what they were thinking, before *sharing* their thoughts with their rest of their home group. This is like the familiar 'think/pair/share' strategy that we use in many other settings. We believe that exploration should always occur in the home-group setting, where students do not feel intimidated by people who are not their friends.

Students' exploratory talk or writing should never be marked, although students may often evaluate it for themselves. Exploratory talk and writing are not intended for outside observers: their purpose is to help students learn, and on no account should students be assessed as they work their way towards understanding. The teacher should, however, monitor exploratory talk and gauge the extent to which individuals are secure and confident in their groups.



Exploration is an opportunity for students to talk their way towards understanding. It involves speculation that should not be interpreted as 'digression'. The teacher monitors students' concept and/or skill development, which may determine whether further explicit instruction is needed for individuals, groups or the whole class.

The role of the teacher during exploration

Much of what we do as teachers while students are engaged in exploratory talk seems strange to us when we first begin to use the planning model to enhance classroom learning. This is mostly because we take a back seat. We must *be quiet*; we must watch and listen and learn from what we see and hear.

As we have indicated earlier, exploration can (and does) occur whenever a group finds something that needs to be understood *better* to enable them to move further along the continuum from receiving information to understanding information. It does not only need to follow an engagement session; it may need to occur several times *within* any engagement period.

Similarly, we know that students may need to explore the *ideas* in a text before they can begin to analyse it, as the example from the lesson using *The Pinballs* (Chapter 4) demonstrates. That teacher planned to allow her students to explore the idea of 'foster homes', and to predict what might happen to the characters. She would attend to this as an aspect of the 'plot' of the narrative *before* she turned the students' attention to narrative structure. In this case, exploration allowed the class to deal with the affective, emotional and more immediately pleasurable aspects of narrative before focusing on more ideational and functional concerns.

As part of our role in managing exploratory talk, we need to take the care and time to foster group skills among our students. Carefully structured questions can assist in this process. And again (as we highlight in Chapter 8), reflection on what went on during a small group's exploration session makes these skills explicit for students who do not participate in these sorts of activities very often in their home discourses. The key aspects of our role during student exploration are to:

- provide time for students to talk in home groups or with partners
- provide direction through open-ended questioning
- monitor small-group talk closely, but not contribute or interrupt
- reflect on information gained from monitoring student talk
- ensure students reflect on their group processes.

The most common way that we organise the classroom for small-group exploratory talk is in home groups of four. Pair talk is also a very popular means of achieving the same ends, particularly with younger students, and when the teacher and students are beginning to work as a classroom community of practice.

Anticipating noise

The excitement of exploratory talk does, at times, result in noise. Many teachers avoid using small groups because they are concerned about comments from their colleagues about noise levels. It is hardly surprising that students at a school where this attitude prevails will consider group work as a chance to gossip rather than an opportunity to learn. However, where small-

group work is an important and regular part of the learning process in the classroom, students quickly learn to work without excessive noise.

There should be only one person talking in each group at any particular time, and as long as the students are seated close to each other, there is no reason for them to speak loudly. As students become more familiar with operating in small groups, they work more quietly. Teacher expectation will also influence how quietly students work. If the teacher is not prepared to accept unproductive or unnecessary noise, students will learn to work quietly.

Fig. 4.4 (pp 52–3) indicates the most popular forms of classroom organisation for exploration. Note that individual exploratory writing or thinking is used much more often with students in the middle years of schooling.

Evaluating teaching for student exploration

Reflecting on our performance as teachers at this stage can be a little depressing at first, as many of us find it difficult *not to be the centre of attention* in our classrooms! Exploration is part of the *process* of learning, and the following evaluation questions are all concerned with how we manage exploratory talk, not with what the students talk about (which is our concern during the engagement stage).

Process concerns

- Have I allowed appropriate time?
- Do the students know what is expected of them?
- Can I monitor the groups as they work to see how the students process the information and how it fits in with their past experience and present understandings?
- Can I take note of misconceptions or misunderstandings that arise, and adapt future input or transformation activities to overcome these?
- Am I able to keep out of exploratory discussion unless I am questioned or asked for clarification?

After Reid, J, Forrestal, P & Cook, J (1989) 'Small Group Learning in the Classroom'. Chalkface Press, Scarborough, WA and Primary English Teaching Association, Sydney.

It is often difficult to accept that students engaged in exploration are keeping to the task. Because of the tentative nature of exploratory talk, students often seem to be digressing from the point as they use their personal life experiences to make sense of the new. The teacher should be aware of this and understand that it is a valuable part of learning which *will* pay dividends as the learning process continues.

Chapter 7

Managing transformation and presentation

Transformation and presentation are vitally important stages of learning that provide students with the opportunity to use the language of the new discourses they are coming to know. It is at these points that they participate in the language, modes of thinking, and values associated with these discourses. Because they are *learning* them in school, rather than acquiring them through participation over a longer time, it is important (as we explained in Chapter 1) that we are *explicit* about the rules and assumptions that govern what people do, say and think when participating in particular discourse communities.

The talk that takes place in work groups (for transformation activities) and in sharing groups (for presentation of the interim or final products of those transformations) is therefore much more focused, and formal, than exploratory talk. Standard Australian English, for instance, is more likely to be needed to communicate and collaborate in this more formal mode. Barnes called presentation talk 'final draft talk', an analogy with the final draft of a piece of writing. This is the mode in which students work with others for a particular purpose and then present what they believe they already understand. We must set the expectation that what they say here is both well prepared and fluently presented*. In many ways, it is much more like teacher talk.

* Jones (1996) elaborates upon the distinctions between 'process' and 'presentation' talk in the PETA book *Talking to Learn*.

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Managing transformation

We want to emphasise four points in relation to managing transformation activities:

- Teachers should not appoint group leaders.
- Students need to understand group processes.
- Students need to have clear and appropriate tasks.
- Students must be free to work alone when necessary.

As you read this section, we hope that you will see how these issues are connected with each other, and once again how the importance of *reflection* (discussed in full in the next chapter) stands out in achieving successful transformation.

Don't appoint group leaders

Although there may be times when a group leader or *reporter* is required, these occasions should be rare. Even then, it is the group who decides on the reporter rather than the teacher. Many teachers have reported unsuccessful group work after they have appointed a group leader, principally because the other group members have felt little responsibility for the results of their work.

In work groups, *everyone* is expected to participate. Sometimes there are 'leaders and followers' in friendship groups, and while this is not questioned in exploratory home-group talk, it is challenged by the structure of working groups. A group of four does not need a leader to chair discussions. If the students are working together to grapple with new information or working on a clearly defined task, different students will adopt the leadership role at different times. The resulting sense of group identity is much stronger than it is in groups that operate with an appointed leader.

The other functions of group leaders (such as recording the group's findings on a large piece of paper or reporting to the whole class) can be shared among group members, thus giving each student the opportunity to practise the skills involved.

If one student in the group is appointed recorder, there is a tendency for the others to sit back and hand over responsibility to that person. Even when the group is recording its findings for public appraisal, each student needs to learn to take on the responsibility for taking notes as an aid to learning. Students need to realise that taking notes can help them understand new information better; therefore, most of the time — especially during the exploration and transformation stages — all students should be note-takers.

Once students have become used to this approach to small-group work, they will accept that taking notes and keeping their own records are natural parts of the learning process. And, of course, they will readily appreciate that when sharing groups are formed by drawing one member from four different work groups, it becomes essential for each individual to have notes on the findings of their group.

Help students to understand group processes

Groups of four students facing each other in a self-contained unit quickly discover how the group dynamics differ from those within the whole class or within pairs. It is important to alert students to the effects of distance, body language, size and familiarity on the functioning of different groupings.

An understanding of the processes of small-group work is best developed through experience and practice. Even so, the teacher needs to create an initial awareness of them, and to build upon it during the reflection stage. In Chapter 3 we point out the need to plan learning *about* group processes from the beginning of every new year, and to nurture the development of students' understandings through careful and explicit attention to them throughout the year.

Set clear and appropriate tasks

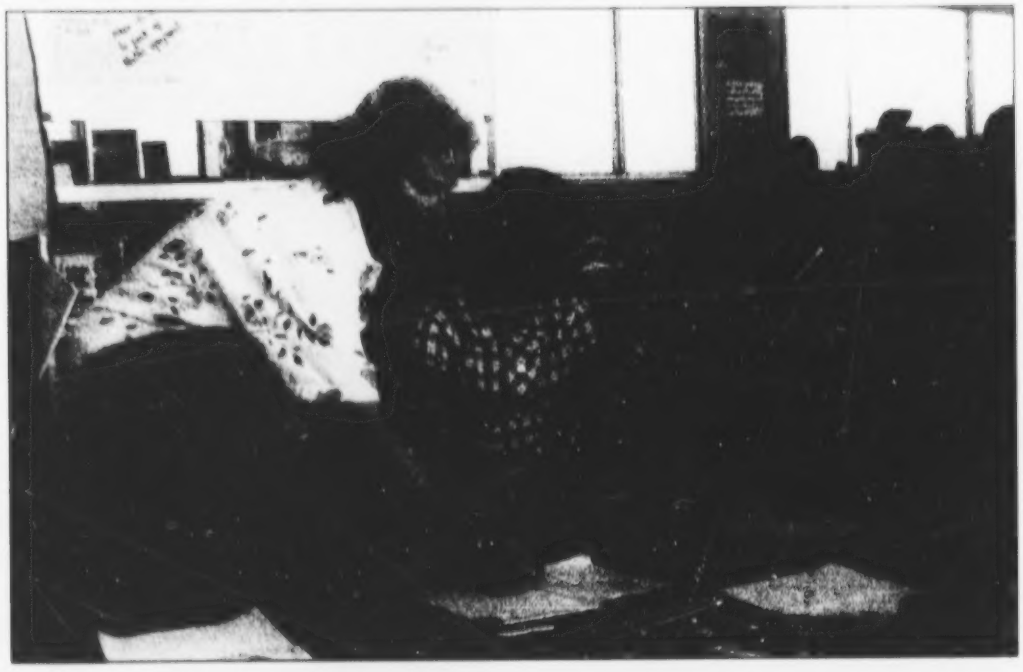
The tasks set for small-group work should be appropriate both for the students' abilities and interests and for the aims of the teaching program. Students need to know the expected outcomes of each transformation activity so that they are able to judge the effectiveness of their thinking, their discussion and their product.

This does not mean that the teacher should foreshadow the results of a particular discussion. Rather, it means that the task must be clearly established. There seems little value in arranging small-group transformation discussion with only a simple direction for students to 'discuss'. This is too much like exploratory talk, where there is no expectation of a measurable *content* outcome at all, but simply a *process* opportunity to relate new information to what students already know.

In their transformation work groups, learners need to know the purpose of the activity, and of their associated talk. For example, it may be to clarify the information presented, or to look at the content from a different point of view, or to rank the three most significant features in order. Simple directions may be enough, but they must be given.

Allow students to work alone when necessary

There are many times when students may need or want to work as individuals. They must be free to leave the group, either physically or mentally, as the requirements of the task dictate. Individual note-taking, thinking, writing and reflection are essentially private activities which have to be managed accordingly. This is why we ask for (and work to maintain) silence while the whole class is working individually, or provide 'quiet areas' within the room into which students may move if they need to spend some time as individuals. Library carrels, of course, are ideal for this, but most primary classrooms have to make do with desks in specially created nooks, or at a distance from the groups.



Classroom organisation should enable pairs or individuals to pursue transformation activities in their own spaces.

Although it is important to account for the difficulties that may confront students who are less able to complete, or less interested in, a particular task, it must be remembered that small-group work often provides the support and sharing that less able students need to achieve more success. The threat of failure for these students is also less acute when they are working in a context that encourages them to seek help from their friends.

The role of the teacher during transformation

The transformation stage involves us in managing the classroom very much more 'on the run'. That being the case, it is important to predict as many variables as possible in our planning. We are aiming to:

- review constraints
- ensure the purpose and direction is clear
- set tasks that ask students to work with information, not just copy it; activities at the higher levels of thinking are most appropriate (synthesising, generalising, hypothesising)
- organise the classroom according to the nature of the task/s

- model and facilitate development of writing, reading and speaking skills
- direct students to the best resource material
- monitor students' progress and understanding
- monitor the quality of work produced
- provide new information where necessary (by recycling the engagement and exploration stages)
- record student progress.

Teachers can decide whether to allow the groups established for previous stages to continue to work together, or to restructure groups according to other criteria. The individual differences and needs of students will be paramount when making this decision.

Fig. 4.4 (pp 52–3) shows the types of group structure that are mostly used for transformation activities.

We give no hard and fast advice about grouping according to ability. Sometimes, as for reading instruction, ability groups are very much more efficient and effective. Often, though, using ability groups means that easier tasks are set for our 'weaker' groups. We believe that, as much as possible, work groups should be of *mixed ability*. This is so that those who know more can refine and extend their knowledge by helping others, and those who are less experienced and able in a particular discourse can better *acquire* a sense of the language and forms of thinking involved.

Managing disruption

Because of its complex causes, the challenge of disruptive students has no perfect answers. However, the teacher can provide an isolation desk for disruptive students, and can tell the student that s/he is being isolated for a particular period because of disruptive behaviour. One disadvantage of this solution is that the more often a student is isolated, the less opportunity s/he has to experience co-operative group behaviour. So it is recommended mainly when it's important that the disruptive student does not disturb the work of others. At the end of any period of isolation, the teacher should discuss the matter and give the student the opportunity to talk about how s/he feels.

If there is a group of disruptive students in a particular class, try having them work together. The teacher can build on peer identification by telling them that if they want to work together, they will have to work well. Peer pressure can be a valuable aid for the teacher using small groups, and disruptive students are generally those who least want to be the only ones with nothing to present to the rest of the class.

Some students are disruptive because of their inability to handle the work set for them. They learn early that the best way to avoid failure is not to try. But the small-group situation allows students the chance to seek help from their friends, and to make use of ideas generated by the group. If the teacher selects tasks that are clearly within the group's capability, the successful operation of the group (as well as the attitude of the students) will be enhanced.

Evaluating teaching for student transformation

At the transformation stage, we must attend to both content and process — to *what* is learnt, and *how*. The following questions give focus to the evaluation of our work as teachers.

Content concerns

- Have I prepared additional information which may be useful as resource material for those students who need to be extended?
- Are the tasks designed to lead the students towards achieving the goals they need to reach?
- How can I take into account the differing ability levels of the students? Are the tasks I have set suitable?

Process concerns

- Can I continue to monitor the work of the small groups so as to provide any additional information required by one group, a number of groups, or the whole class?
- Can I deal quickly with any misconceptions or questions from individuals or groups, or refer them immediately to other resources for clarification?
- Am I 'constructing' work groups for a real purpose, or am I just moving students into them? What benefits might they gain from more careful planning of work groups on my part?

After Reid, J, Forrestal, P & Cook, J (1989) 'Small Group Learning in the Classroom'. Chalkface Press, Scarborough, WA and Primary English Teaching Association, Sydney.

Managing presentation

Once work groups have had the opportunity to *transform* the information they are inquiring about and developing fuller understanding, it is important that they move, in a more formal sense, towards a controlled use of the language and concepts involved through some form of presentation.

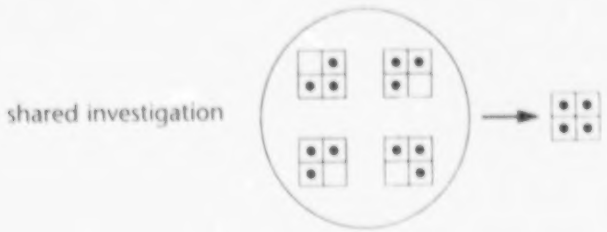
In managing the composition of *sharing groups*, we need to consider the potential effect on such things as the students' responsibility and investment in presenting their interim knowledge well. For instance, in a mixed-sex class, there may be value in asking a group of boys to combine with a group of girls at this stage. This can have value both from a sociological point of view and because it may create a little more constructive tension in the groups as they communicate their ideas.

What is important is variety. We must avoid the routine patterning that can quickly lead to complacency ('This is our home group; this is our work group; this is our sharing group'). For instance, forming sharing groups that *all* contain students who play football might be valuable when students are sharing the procedural texts they have written to outline the rules of their own choice of team game. Similarly, a group that appears to be having difficulty with a task can often be combined with a group that has found the task easier. Apart from the obvious peer-tutoring benefits to the former group, this combination can also serve as a consolidation of learning for the latter group.

Organising the presentation stage so that groups are working towards presenting their work or ideas to larger audiences, or to audiences outside the classroom, creates an increasing responsibility for them to work towards a high-standard product. The quality of work-group discussion is improved when students know that they are required to make the group findings public. This does not mean that we should ask groups simply to report back to the class. This need only happen when there is a genuine expectation within the class that they will hear from a student or group — and then only when groups have not all been discussing the same question.

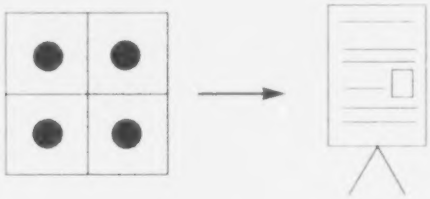
There are better ways of achieving the purposes of reporting back, such as:

- requiring one representative from each of four work groups to form a sharing group to pool their results and check their understandings

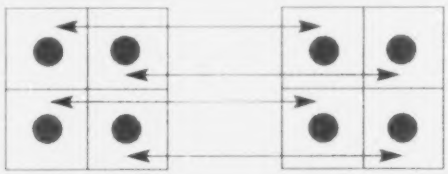


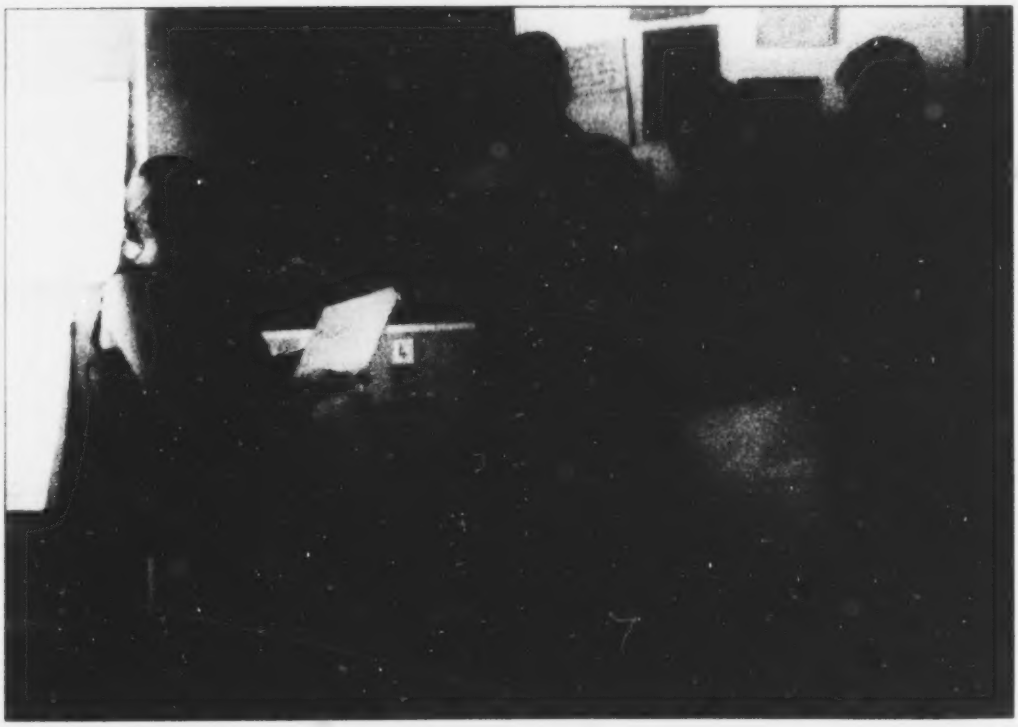
- asking each of four work groups to examine different aspects of the topic, or to examine the subject matter from different angles. Sharing groups, made up of one representative from each of those four groups, may then be formed to share the information gathered

- requiring each work group to put its findings on a whiteboard, or a large sheet of paper, for other class members to examine critically



- asking each student to explain what her/his work group has come up with to the person sitting in the matching position in the next group.





Reporting-back sessions should enable a range of media and audiences so that they do not become predictable or repetitive. Often, the teacher is not a part of the presentation audience.

On some occasions, larger sharing groups may be appropriate. Sharing groups of eight can be formed by asking two work groups to compare notes, by asking pairs from four groups to combine, or by asking one student from each of eight home groups to work together. Groups of six can be formed in a similar variety of ways.

The role of the teacher during presentation

During the presentation of outcomes from work groups, the teacher does have the opportunity to make certain that the students have learned what was intended. But unless all sharing is done with the whole class, there is no way the teacher can see, hear and evaluate the work of all work groups.

The order in which we want to assess our students' skills of oral communication, their concept development or their production of certain text types is often a governing factor in what we do during small-group presentation sessions. We do not attend to every student and every group. This demonstrates to students that in a community of practice, the responsibility for quality products lies with its members, not always an outside 'expert'. At the same time, the students realise that all the time during the presentation stage, the teacher is attending closely to, and perhaps formally evaluating, the product of some work group's effort.

In summary, our role as teachers during the presentation stage is to:

- create a sense of performance by explicitly assisting groups with the language demands of a formal setting
- ensure that products have been shaped to suit a given audience and purpose
- organise the classroom according to the nature of the task/s
- elicit audience response and feedback
- encourage sharing of products
- facilitate development of presentation skills such as handwriting, layout and design, editing/ proofing, rehearsal, public speaking, reading, use of multimedia
- evaluate products in terms of goals.

Fig. 4.4 (pp 52–3) shows the types of group structure that are mostly used for presentation activities.

Evaluating teaching for student presentation

Once again, the evaluation of our work as teachers in this phase focuses on both process and content issues.

Content concerns

- Have I made sure that the students are aware of their audience and its particular requirements? (For example, teaching a new mathematics problem to another class in the same year means that the language and form of the presentation used can be similar to those of the students' own classroom experience. Teaching it to a class of younger students, however, will make different demands.)
- Have I made clear to the students the way in which their work will be assessed? Or have I negotiated with them about this? If the work is to be presented to an audience beyond the classroom, who should assess it?
- Is the material presented at this stage sufficient to show that the students have accomplished the goals of the learning experience? Is anything else required of them or me?

Process concerns

- What factors will influence the decisions I make about the kind of sharing groups that must be organised at this stage? (For example, will I ask a pair from one group to combine with a pair from another group to give each student the security of working with someone from their home group? Or will I ask one student from each of four work groups to form a sharing group so as to create a degree of tension and ensure that they all prepare adequate notes?)
- What other considerations should affect the structure of the sharing groups? (For example, will I ask pairs of girls to combine with pairs of boys? Will I ensure that each group has a mix of abilities? If I am moving a pair from a work group, will I allow students who are sitting together to move, or will I choose those sitting opposite or diagonally opposite each other?)
- If the presentation is to take the form of a written document, have I made sure that all group members have their own copies?

After Reid, J, Forrestal, P & Cook, J (1989) 'Small Group Learning in the Classroom'. Chalkface Press, Scarborough, WA and Primary English Teaching Association, Sydney.

At both the transformation and presentation stages, we are more likely to intervene in the activities of the work or sharing group in order to correct, clarify, redirect and evaluate what the students say, do and produce. Managing learning at these stages requires us to be constantly replanning and creatively 'ad-libbing' in response to student need.

References and sources

Jones, P (ed.) (1996) *Talking to Learn*. Primary English Teaching Association, Sydney.

to consider their feelings. "And then I won't have to feel cross with you all afternoon!" might repair any bruises to student–teacher relations that might be felt on both sides.

The role of the teacher in managing reflection

Students should learn to take some responsibility for the evaluation of their own learning in small groups. It is important for the teacher to encourage them in the type of decision-making needed to advance their work. Work groups must be made aware that some members may work more slowly than others. Specific tasks should be allocated accordingly. Groups also need to know that their work is to be completed for presentation at a certain time, and must organise their activities to that end. Of course, teachers can help in this continuous evaluation of progress by issuing reminders to individuals or to groups.

Checklists, devised by the teacher or by the groups themselves, often help in planning what needs to be done and in reinforcing the ground rules of effective group work.

Figure 8.1: *Student-devised checklist supporting ongoing work-group evaluation. This group is publishing an information book on the Ballarat Goldfields. It has used a teacher-supplied task sheet to create the checklist headings*

Decide how you will manage the shared tasks of:	**Name/s**	**Date due**
Designing and creating the cover sheet • **Collect pictures from Internet: save to 'Cover' file** • **Collect and scan pictures from books** • **Decide what we want on the cover** • **Each person does mock-up of page layout** • **Vote on the best layout** • **Finish the layout design**		
Organising and printing the table of contents • **All chapters must be finished** • **Write introduction to the book** • **Make one Word file of the whole report: leave spaces for photos; paginate; finish table of contents** • **DO THINGS BELOW FIRST**		
Preparing the glossary • **Read each other's chapters and underline key words** 1. **Markus – Immigration** 2. **Jacee – Mining techniques** 3. **Mel – Clothing and food** 4. **Ang – Health issues** 5. **Jacee – Work** 6. **Jacee & Marcus – Introduction** • **Find dictionary definitions** • **Save to 'Glossary' file** • **Sort by name** • **DO BEFORE TOC!**	 **Jacee** **Ang** **Markus** **Jacee** **Mel** **Ang** **Everyone** **Ang**	
Compiling the bibliography • **Collect and list all sources** • **Make into bibliography** • **DO BEFORE TOC!**	 **As above** **Mel**	

The student-devised work list opposite, for a Year 5 work group whose task will take nearly two weeks to complete, is useful for regular end-of-lesson evaluation. It monitors progress, allowing teacher and students to prioritise tasks at the start of each session. As we monitor groups at this stage of the lesson, we may need to provide explicit reminders as to why a task is to be approached in a particular way, so that students can refocus on the learning outcomes they are aiming for.

Teacher-devised checklists for evaluating group processes (such as that in Fig. 8.2) may not be required as often. They are most valuable when they are used to satisfy a need — either when the teacher perceives that a group is not working effectively or when the group asks for help. This type of checklist will not instantly solve problems, but it is a useful reference that focuses students' attention on ways of fixing problems within the group.

Evaluating both progress and process is an essential part of getting things done in the classroom, and of creating in students a sense of responsibility for their own learning. It also helps the teacher to monitor the work of groups very quickly, and to keep a check on what is happening — and how the program is developing.

Figure 8.2: *Teacher-devised checklist supporting ongoing work-group evaluation*

Group checklist			
	Yes	No	Comments
1. Did everybody participate?			
2. Did anybody feel left out?			
3. Were all members contributing?			
4. Did one person dominate discussions, or cut others off?			
5. Was there any argument? How was it resolved?			
6. Did everybody know what they had to do?			
7. Are you satisfied with the work you have done (so far)?			

Source: Reid J, Forrestal, P & Cook, J (1989) 'Small Group Learning in the Classroom'. Chalkface Press, Scarborough, WA and Primary English Teaching Association, Sydney.

Evaluating and assessing the work of the classroom

The planning model that we have set out can also help teachers to *assess* students' achievements, because it provides opportunities to monitor their work at different stages. There is no reason that compels the work produced for sharing groups at the presentation stage to be formally assessed. Draft texts, performance rehearsals or websites in production are just as important as 'finished' products. Peer and teacher feedback at points such as these provides useful 'formative' evaluation. Decisions about when and what to assess should be influenced by the teacher's aims and the reasons for the assessment.

The planning model is designed to allow us to encourage students to fit their presentation to the relevant audience and purpose. If that audience is always, ultimately, us as the teacher (what James Britton called the 'teacher-as-examiner'), and if the purpose is ultimately only really to provide the teacher with a basis for marks, or material for an assessment portfolio, then we have a problem. There is little motive for students to draft, edit and refine their understanding and their work products to suit the purpose and the target audience. And one object of working in small groups is to provide ready access to other people who can help improve the product.

In planning our work programs, we need to decide both what to assess and why we are assessing. Let's say work groups in a Year 6 class have prepared a set of stories, on a set social/environmental theme, for Year 2 students. They must present these to the intended audience. After their presentation, they may report that they valued the experience of reading their stories to the younger children far more highly than their teacher's assessment comment might indicate. This means that a reflective *self-assessment* based on the experience of reading to the target audience might have been more appropriate than the more distanced appraisal of the texts themselves.

The teacher's mark and comment may do far less to encourage students to make the effort to improve their work next time. If this happens regularly, students may not feel a need to make decisions about improving their work, because they think that we as teachers will do that for them. So again, by asking students to review their own work, or that of a sharing partner, according to assessment criteria that have been set out explicitly, the teacher can reinforce the learning that has gone on throughout the engagement–reflection cycle.

In the example above, the written stories and the self-assessment (or peer assessments) might well be included in the student's assessment portfolio, along with any other comments from the teacher. Alternatively, in a situation such as this when there is a real reason for the final product to be 'perfect', and several of the learning objectives could be met before that point, working groups might be asked to share drafts, amend them and then present them to the teacher. We would then be able both to correct and assess students' achievement of several outcomes before the stories were finalised for the real audience.

These suggestions, and others that come from discussing assessment with the class, will mean that we can incorporate a variety of methods and styles of assessment and reporting into our final review of a student's total performance. This helps to overcome any fears that the student and parents may have that we have assessed the child prematurely, leaving little chance for improvement to be recognised.

Managing individual and group assessment

As the members of any small group are individuals, establishing a home-group identity should not cause any individual's identity to be sacrificed. As we noted earlier, students' names should be used when identifying a home group, not a totem name or 'Kim's group'. Assigning names to *work* groups, though (e.g. the 'life-cycle group', the 'habitat' group'), might be quite appropriate, since these temporary names highlight the work of the transformation activity. Teachers using the planning model to organise their lessons will have many opportunities to monitor and value the contributions of individuals within small groups, and will be able to take this into account when reflecting on group processes.

We stress that a small group is a means of helping students to learn better — and that it is the *individual* student's learning that we are concerned with. Providing a group mark may be appropriate at times — for instance, when students decide that their assessment for a particular product should be for the group as a whole.

Teachers are often concerned that if a student's work is presented in a version which the whole group has helped to edit and improve, the product will be better than the student could achieve alone. *This is precisely the case.* Teachers aim to help students improve their work and to do as well as they can. If small-group work results in a better product, then it is the result of the work that has gone on in the classroom in order to help the student improve. It is still the achievement of the student in the classroom situation, and the method of instruction does not invalidate the student's achievement. In any case, teacher planning can provide for a variety of assessment methods, so that no student need be continually 'advantaged' in this way.

Requiring students to work towards an excellent finished product, and giving them the opportunity to do this in small groups, also means that they have this experience to draw on when required to work alone.

Where students are able to see the results of their work, to evaluate their success in terms of audience reaction, and to reflect upon the learning process they have experienced, the teacher may find that marks are superfluous. In these circumstances, the process, for the learners, has become more important than the product.

Small-group work, then, encourages continuous evaluation of the program designed by the teacher, the work done by students and the learning that occurs. This places the teacher in a position of knowledge about the work of the classroom and the direction to take next. At the same time, students are encouraged to work towards the best kind of learning for them, and towards achieving the best products of the learning experience.

Fig. 4.4 (pp 52–3) shows the types of group structure that are mostly used for reflection activities.

Returning to home groups

At the reflection stage, friendship groups again provide the security that allows students to draw on their past experiences and relate them to new information. Extended small-group discussion helps students to understand their friends' attitudes and values, and thus leads to deeper understanding. It also helps us as teachers to get valuable feedback on our teaching.

It is very useful to ask students to respond to questions such as:

- What have we studied in this unit/lesson/week? Why was it important for us to learn about this?
- What have we learned from this unit/lesson/week?
- What questions do I still have about this topic? What more would I like to learn about this topic?

In summary, our role as teachers during the reflection stage is to:

- review the products and outcomes of learning
- review the learning process
- show enthusiasm and disappointment as appropriate
- encourage students to evaluate their own progress in terms of curriculum aims
- organise the classroom appropriately for individual talk / small-group talk / whole-class discussion
- re-establish links between this activity and the whole curriculum
- solicit student ideas for follow-up activities, future directions and extension work
- reflect upon all this for future planning.

Evaluating teaching for student reflection

As at other stages, we must focus on both process and content issues when we consider the success of reflection activities.

Content concerns

- Have I been clear about the learning outcomes for this topic?
- Have I been able to point students to resources and sources of expertise in our local community?
- What questions do the students still have about this topic? Where should I go next?

Process concerns

- Have I encouraged students to reflect on the process of learning, as well as on what they have learned?
- Do their reflections attempt to evaluate the goals of the learning experience?
- Can I use their reflections as a means of assessing the effectiveness of my program, or as a basis for future planning?

After Reid, J, Forrestal, P & Cook, J (1989) 'Small Group Learning in the Classroom'. Chalkface Press, Scarborough, WA and Primary English Teaching Association, Sydney.

Small-group work involves students in reflective evaluation to a much greater extent than teacher-directed, whole-class work. Groups need to be aware of their own actions. They must be conscious of how they operate, and responsible for any changes that they make to their own performance.

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Chapter 9

Managing professional growth

Our 'professional development' as teachers is becoming increasingly a matter that we are being required to negotiate for ourselves within our schools. Notions of lifelong learning and professional responsibility, along with the increasing need we feel to keep up to date with rapid technological and social changes, mean that we are continually seeking different forms of in-service 'PD'. Unless we test out (*explore* and *transform*) new ideas and *reflect* upon the changes they imply when we *present* them to students and colleagues in our everyday teaching work, we are in danger of not owning (or feeling confident about) our growth as professionals. In other words, we must participate as learners ourselves if we are not to be victims of changing fashions in teaching, and lose sight of what matters in what we do: our students' learning.

In classrooms where small-group work is the basis for programming and learning, we still need traditional teaching attributes such as:

- general and specific knowledge about what we are teaching
- the ability to arouse interest in a topic
- careful preparation and structuring of the learning experience
- a clear sense of overall goals, and the ability to set specific goals that will help them to be reached
- the ability to help students to set goals particular to their own learning processes and knowledge
- access to up-to-date information and the ability to help students find information
- awareness of the need to set reasonable deadlines for student work
- good listening skills and openness to students' differing needs and points of view
- willingness to teach individuals, groups or the whole class directly when necessary

- awareness of what is happening at all stages during the lesson
- the ability to provide a safe, orderly and well disciplined classroom.

Organising classrooms so that students can learn more effectively through participation in small groups is a skill that needs to be developed through practice. The more confident and experienced we become as teachers, the more effective our students' work in small groups is likely to be. To manage a successful small-group classroom as a community of practice, both we and our students need to see small-group work as an important learning activity that is a regular part of everyday classroom routine.

For this to happen, we need to consider the management—learning continuum (see page 29) as a means to test out and *research* the management of small-group learning in our classrooms each year. This chapter outlines some possible ways for teachers to introduce their students to the concept of group work. These ways are put forward as investigations (action research) into how students work rather than as a 'new order' that must be followed absolutely. In *Small Group Learning in the Classroom* (Reid, Forrestal & Cook, 1989), we talked about many of these issues in a chapter called 'Getting Started'.

Action research for professional growth

Action research is the perfect model for classroom investigations because it must always be linked to a specific context or location. In action research, participants work to identify and resolve issues relevant to themselves. Typically, it involves a two-stage process of identifying a problem, then initiating and maintaining a change process.

In Australia, Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) introduced action research to educational practitioners as a dynamic, cyclic and recursive way in which they could manage their professional growth rather than being told what to do by experts who did not work in their situations. It is not experimental research; it does not require 'control groups' or large numbers to ensure the reliability of findings. Instead it is lived, situated practice. The 'action' that is taken is not meant to be replicated exactly in another setting, as settings are always different, even in relation to time. But, as Grundy (1995) reminds us, the action is always strategic and planned, and aimed towards a goal that is deemed necessary by the community of practice in which the research is situated, or the teacher as part of that community.

The action researcher cannot know how her work will 'end'. In fact, the cyclic nature of action research means that, as action and reflection on action overlap, changes in the research plan are likely to occur as people learn from action and understand more about their situation. As Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) argue, this means that, for the researcher, the process of research must begin in the classroom. Action research is thus a dynamic process in which four research steps — *planning, acting, observing* and *reflecting* — are enacted and repeated through a spiral.

In the following sections, we provide support for teachers who want to test and try out the small-group planning model as a means of enhancing student learning in a community of practice. We do so in terms of the action-research spiral.

Planning to introduce small groups for learning

Successful small-group work is most likely to occur in a well organised and well controlled classroom where relaxed and friendly relations between students and teacher have developed. Deciding to introduce small-group work at the start of a new year, or with a class that seems to need discipline, may appear to demand too much time and effort from teachers. However, we believe this reflects a common misconception that small-group work is 'uncontrolled'. Nothing could be further from the truth. Organising the classroom into small groups gives teachers *more* control over both learning and classroom discipline.

Teachers are in a position to hear and see what their students are thinking and doing much more effectively than when they are working with the whole class as a single unit. Many teachers find that discipline in the classroom *improves* when students operate in small groups, because all are involved in discussion or the work of the classroom. The immediate sense of responsibility that students feel towards other group members can promote *self-discipline* more effectively than any feeling of responsibility towards the teacher. If this sense is cultivated at the start of the year, there is much more likelihood of faster success.

When planning to introduce small-group work, we should always make sure we *share the theory* with our students. Action research is collaborative research. We are not working alone, and the students are as important a part of the classroom community as we are! We should tell students what we're trying, what they're going to be doing, and why. This will give purpose to the activities that follow. Students should also be reminded frequently to reflect on how they are handling and understanding the process of small-group work.

It is also important and worthwhile to discuss the small-group approach with the school administration. This should enable teachers to negotiate a more supportive environment for the early stages. Working with a colleague is an excellent idea; you will be able to share successes (and failures) with someone who knows exactly what you are trying to do. It also allows you to reflect with a critical friend who might be able to see things from a different perspective from either you or your students.

Start small

It is always important to start slowly. A gradual beginning (which means starting with your 'best' classes in middle schools) can help boost confidence in managing small groups. Like students, we need to practise new techniques and skills, and we also need a supportive atmosphere in which to learn. We will always make mistakes, and we should not be afraid of this. That's what research is — trying things out to see what works! We find that beginning by using the planning model for morning lessons, when everyone is fresh and alert, is a good move.

Students who have little experience with small-group work may find it a shock to change suddenly from sitting quietly in rows, paying attention to the teacher, to sitting in small

groups and being *asked* to talk. In this situation, it is only natural to expect some sort of initial overreaction to the perceived freedom of small-group work, particularly in home groups. This can be defused, to a large extent, by regular references to the theory, and requests to reflect on "what's happening now?". Careful planning of small-group tasks is also essential.

Many teachers find the design of small-group tasks a creative challenge. This is curriculum planning at the micro level, and it is here that the requirement for 'high intellectual content' becomes acute. Many Australian education departments are working towards the use of 'rich tasks', in which the essential leanings and required curriculum outcomes are designed to be achieved through integrative and investigative group tasks that solve 'real' problems.

As a first step from individual work, plan for short, specific and purposeful work in *pairs*. Reading each other's stories or notes, testing each other on number combinations, or checking each other's methods are simple and well tried activities that help students learn to listen to and assist each other.

Still using pairs, gradually incorporate the type of exploratory talk that allows students to make sense of new information. For example, a simple direction to 'explain to a partner' the algorithm that has just been described on the board, or the meaning of a technical term which has been mentioned for the first time, immediately requires students to use their language as they think. Similarly, they can 'tell a partner' about a time in their own lives that relates to a story, or a description that has just been read. These sessions should be kept very short — only one to three minutes to begin with — and should be incorporated frequently into lessons as they develop. In this way, the value of talking to help learning is stressed through overt teacher action and instruction.

Remember that to somebody not in a small group (like the teacher), the early stages of exploratory talk can often sound as though the group is wandering away from the task. However, teachers should be wary of stopping a group if it appears to be digressing, or if the discussion seems irrelevant to the topic, or even repetitious and slow. Exploration is a time when students can relate new information to their own experience, and often that experience will include memories, anecdotes or references to television shows. Keeping exploratory sessions short at the beginning will save headaches.

Transformation and presentation tasks can be started as activities for pairs, too — with the concept of a larger group being developed along the way. For example, dividing up the activities to be done in mathematics, and having partners check each other's work before swapping with another pair for marking, will save time in the lesson, as well as allowing the teacher to identify the problems that arise in discussion. This organisation also ensures that students' initial experience in a small group is both purposeful, well structured and highly organised in terms of time.

Watch the clock

Planning for time segments is very helpful at the beginning, as is use of a bell or gong to indicate that time (for exploratory or talk, exploratory writing or drawing) is up following an instruction such as: "I'll give you *one minute* to tell your partner what I just did when I divided that circle into four equal pieces. I'li ring the gong when it's time for the first person to finish, and the partner to have their turn. Think about what I just did for a second ... [wait a second!] ... now off you go."

Keep all group tasks *short* and very clear when starting. Suitable activities might include such things as:

- making a group list
- arranging blocks or materials to form a designated shape
- finding the main points in a paragraph
- predicting the results of an experiment or the end of a story
- checking that every person in the group knows what to do next.

As our confidence and understanding grows and deepens, so too does our ability to use and structure this sort of interaction. And as the students' involvement in the lesson grows, our confidence is boosted still further. Learning is fun on its own terms when people are engaged and participating. We do not need to 'make' it fun by adding distractions or rewards.

Set the room up

When planning to implement small-group work, we do need to make sure that the classroom furniture is arranged so that all students can see each other in home and work groups. This encourages students to practise basic communication techniques: looking at the people they are talking to; listening carefully and thinking about what they say; referring to things that other class members have said; and mentioning group members or other sources of information by name when appropriate.

As we have explained in Chapters 5–7, except at the presentation stage (when combinations of six, and sometimes even eight, are useful), groups should consist of *four* members, with pairs sitting directly opposite each other. Often the groups will need to be placed at an angle to the board so that students do not have to turn around in their chairs to watch or attend to the teacher. Remember that friendship groups may sometimes be (or become) larger than four. A decision will need to be made about whether five students should work as one group or as a three and a pair. If faced with a friendship group of six or more, always ask those students to form two smaller groups.

Implementing a plan to introduce small groups for learning

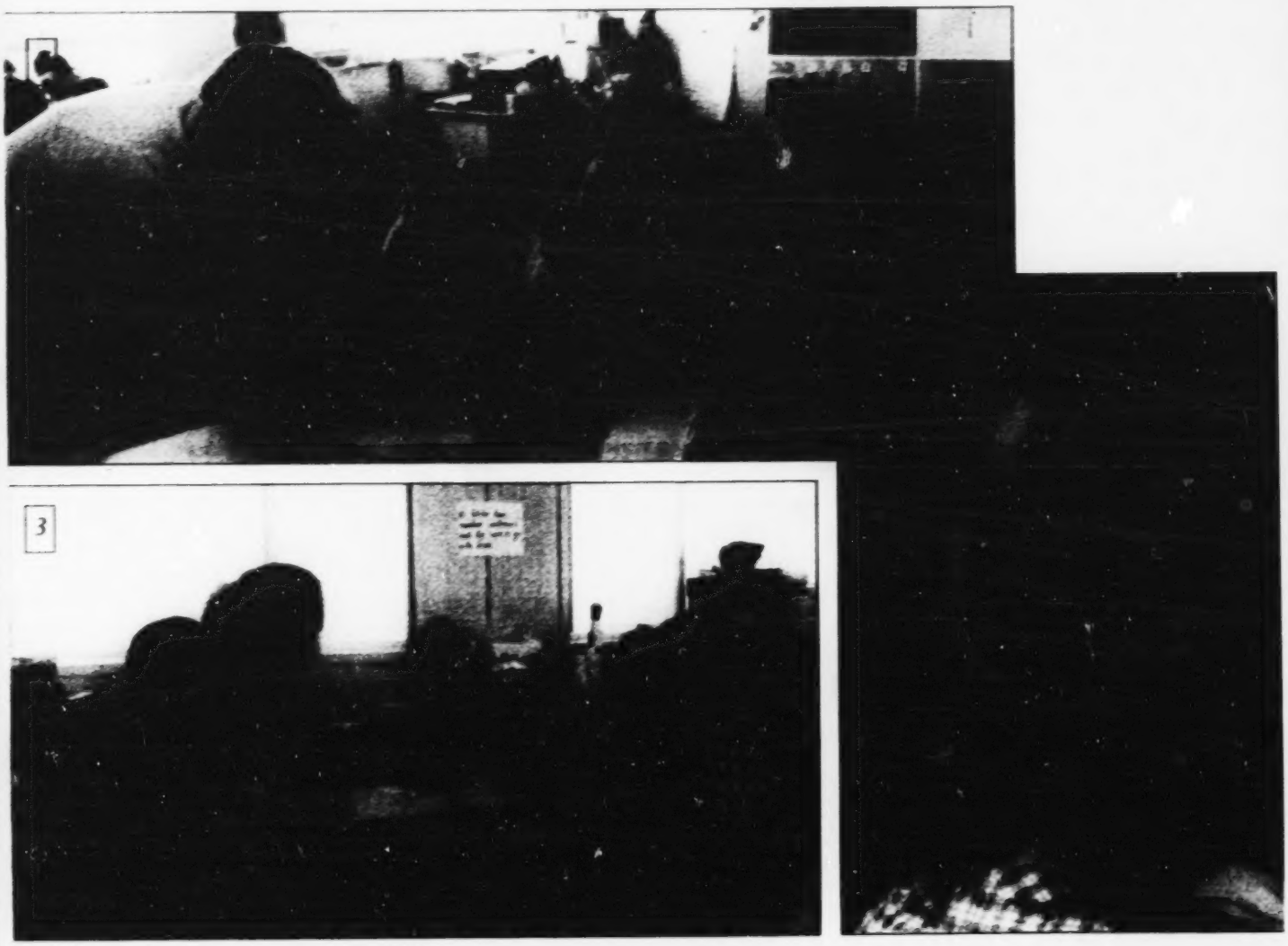
Once we have planned a session or a day in which we will research how small-group work operates in our classroom, we must remember that it is our actions, language and ways of interacting that we will be changing as we test out this form of management. These things are, of course, interrelated. Because they are part of the unconscious discourse of teaching that we have acquired by participating in whole-class teaching situations over many years, they are not easy things to change.

Calling for attention over the top of the class, for instance, may have been a regular part of our classroom action. This may still work well during the engagement stage in a small-group classroom — when attention may actually be on the teacher — but after that, we lose our central and dominating position. This is not a loss of control (it is what we have actually

planned to happen), but it can often feel strange, especially when it's working well, and the teacher may even be superfluous to the learning and interaction going on within the classroom. You may need to practise these implementation skills over time before they become more automatic.

Use your body carefully

As people who have been in social or educational group sessions ourselves, we are probably well aware of the effect that an outsider has on a group's functioning. As teachers, it can be easy to forget this, and so it is important to take this into account whenever we interrupt a group. Body language is particularly important. The messages our bodies convey can often (as Simpson et al. (1999) remind us in relation to indigenous students) contradict and work against our best intentions. Remember always that we should endeavour not to interrupt exploratory talk!



The photos opposite show three ways in which teachers can interact with a working group. In the first, the teacher is standing, and has positioned herself outside the group space. If we address or interrupt the group from this position, the students must stop what they are doing to listen. If (as we hope will be the case) they are involved in the task at hand, they may very likely miss our instruction, request or question. We would have to raise our voice to talk from this position, thus making it more difficult for other groups to work quietly.

The second photo shows how the teacher has moved into the group space. From the students' point of view, this is likely to be seen as an augmentation to the functioning of the group, rather than as an interruption imposed from the outside. The teacher, by watching and listening for a the right moment to interrupt, is likely to gain the attention of the whole group without having to raise her voice, as a part of the process of discussion.

The third photo shows how the teacher has become part of the group by positioning herself so that she has close physical and eye contact with the students. Here she is able to make suggestions, give directions or information as an intrinsic part of the group process. This position is also best for talking with an individual student while the rest of the group continues to work.

Prepare for resistance

We need to be very clear in our own minds, and to our students, that students who *won't* work in groups (for whatever reason) *don't* work in groups. For this reason, we need to provide desks for students who are disruptive, or for students who choose to work alone. Not taking part in the classroom work as a group member does not mean not working, though. Opportunities for these students to share their thoughts and work with other students can be organised on a short-term basis, until they are willing or able to return to a home or work group.

It is important for teachers to *help* students to learn to work in small groups. Very young children can sometimes be exaggeratedly polite to each other in the early stages of group work, or lack some of the social skills needed. In these situations, our focus must shift for a time to managing learning in a fairly closed and explicit way. We must model, teach and reinforce social and interactive processes as we work, rather than 'waiting until they're ready' to begin group work.

Older students can sometimes seem inconsiderate, cynical or self-centred, and perhaps unwilling to accept challenges to their ideas or corrections to their work. This is why the reflection activities discussed in Chapter 8 are so useful. Questions for this type of reflection might be as simple as "What does your group do when you've finished the task early?" or as potentially illuminating as "How does your group deal with interruptions when you're working?". This type of reflection places the responsibility for both the behaviour and the work in the classroom on the students and on the groups.

Don't leave molehills unattended

In the early weeks of teaching with small groups, we may find ourselves searching for the most effective ways of constantly monitoring groups, giving directions and clarifying misconceptions. When the need arises to steer a group back to work, it is important that the

teacher *moves directly to the group* concerned and does not call out across other working groups. There is nothing to be gained from stopping the work of nine groups to chastise one group, or even one or two students. If we notice a problem arising when we scan the room, then instead of naming it, as is common in whole-group classrooms, we *approach* it!

However, if it becomes apparent that most of the groups are not working in the way we planned, the best thing — to save both peace of mind and the students' time — is to stop them all. In these cases the problem may lie with the task, or with the relationships within the class. It may be, for instance, that the task is unclear, too hard, boring, perceived as irrelevant, or too slight for the time given. Enabling the students to reflect on what's going wrong is essential. This can take some getting used to, because it is often not our first response to such a situation if we are used to seeing *ourselves* as solely responsible for our students' learning.

It might be that the source of disruption to our plans lies outside the classroom. A lunch-time fight, a gathering feud, an individual's personal problems or physical lack of energy through illness or hunger might cause disruptions that we cannot anticipate in our planning. Sometimes it is impossible for us to gauge the reasons on the spot.

As a last resort, it may be necessary to intervene by calling for a total cessation of work and attention to the urgent outside issues — whether for a whole class or for an individual. Individual problems might be referred to support staff within the school. Alternatively, the teacher might offer time out, or the opportunity to read quietly until the student is ready to talk it over. This is always a fall-back *disciplinary* intervention — a pause in the healthy learning process that we are trying to institutionalise within the classroom.

Observing what happens when we introduce small groups for learning

As teachers, we can learn a great deal about an individual student's involvement and knowledge, a small group's progress towards a learning outcome, or the success of our own planning and management simply by standing back and observing what is happening in the classroom.

When first working with small groups, it takes time for us to realise that it is not always necessary to hear every word of a discussion to know what is going on. As we become more confident, we can see that it is possible to monitor home, work and sharing groups' talk by listening to the tone of the talk, watching the faces of the students, and so on. It is also often possible to listen to a discussion while tidying the computer desks, pinning a chart up on the noticeboard, cleaning the whiteboard or looking for a book. Simply walking around the room allows us to gauge the degree of involvement within a group while moving past it.

Collect evidence of student talk

A tape recorder can be a very useful aid. When students are unused to having their talk valued by their teachers, they need to have that sense of value reinforced. Simply taking the time to record a small group's talk now and again, then listening to it in the car on the way home (or in the shower!), enables us to *use* what was said during the discussion as the basis

for comment the next day. This allows students to see that what they contribute to their learning is just as important as what they are given.

Of course, we can learn many things about our own classroom performance by listening to a series of such tapes. This is an excellent and relatively simple method of getting to know exactly what goes on after students have been asked to work together.

The tape recorder can be used to demonstrate appropriate noise levels within the room, and as a strategy to keep a 'problem' group on track by asking them to record the summary of their discussion by the end of the available time. Students are often surprised by how much ground they have covered without being conscious of it.

Gather information and feedback from students

Questioning

Questioning needs close attention because it occupies so much classroom time. Most oral interactions between teacher and students take the form of question and response. Typically, teachers already know the answers to the questions they ask. Traditional question-and-answer sessions are, therefore, not occasions for genuine communication as part of a learning act.

Research findings into teacher questioning of whole classes indicate that in very many classrooms:

- seventy per cent of the talking is done by the teacher
- the questions asked tend to be low-level ones which require only recall of factual information
- students respond with one-word or one-sentence answers
- teachers ask questions at an average rate of one every twelve seconds
- very few teachers allow more than one second before expecting a response
- question-asking is largely the province of teachers
- on occasions when the question posed appears to offer a wider range of response, teachers will accept only one answer.

The emphasis in whole-class question-and-answer sessions is on students communicating what they know to their teacher. For teachers concerned with developing their students' ability to communicate, these sessions leave much to be desired. There is little opportunity for students to express their thoughts because of the amount of teacher talk, and because only one student can talk at a time. In any case, the situation does not lend itself to students talking in an extended way. The opportunity for conversation and argument, in which teacher and student engage in *developing* ideas, is also denied.

Questioning sessions conducted in this way provide very little time for students to think, nor are the kinds of questions posed thought-provoking. Consequently, they offer few opportunities for students to use talk in order to learn. At best, they will be frustrating for the

student, who may become engaged but is then denied the opportunity to make more of what comes up.

Wait time

Teachers can improve questioning sessions by asking open, rather than closed, questions, and by allowing students adequate time to answer.

Wait time refers to the period of time that is deliberately allowed to elapse between:

- the teacher's question and a student's response, or
- the student's response and any comment from the teacher.

As we noted above, very few teachers wait more than one second after a question before making a further teaching move, such as rephrasing the question or naming a student to answer it. And yet a wait time of three to five seconds is needed for students to think about what has been discussed and formulate a response.

Wait time, when applied consistently, can be a very simple yet effective means of giving students time to produce more thoughtful answers, comments or opinions. It often results in a more reflective environment for discussion, particularly if it is combined with open questions beyond the literal level.

Thinking time

A worthwhile strategy which extends the concept of wait time involves the teacher allowing a pause of between 30 and 60 seconds before expecting students to answer questions. To use this strategy effectively, teachers will need to:

- explain the strategy and its purpose, stressing that the pause provides thinking time in which to generate a response to the question
- ensure that they ask questions which require careful thought
- provide variety by insisting on silent contemplation on some occasions and by allowing talk in pairs or small groups at other times.

A longer wait or thinking time should elicit lengthier and more thoughtful responses, more high-level thinking and more attentive listening. It should also encourage teachers to listen more carefully to what their students have to say.

Reflecting on efforts to introduce small groups for learning

Successful small-group work in the classroom doesn't just happen. It depends upon the degree to which teachers understand how to operate small groups, the commitment they have to their success, and the extent to which students regard working in groups as a significant learning strategy. Experience will enhance the teacher's understanding of how to

help students learn in small groups, just as it will develop the students' ability to work effectively in them.

Don't expect instant success

Teachers should be aware that instant success is rare. There will be students who don't like to work in groups, some whose school experience has led them to perceive any situation where the teacher is not making them work as an excuse not to work, and others who are just plain naughty. Yet teachers should be wary of blaming the students for their lack of expertise in handling the small-group situation. This is tantamount to saying: "They're not succeeding with group work at present, so I won't give them any chance to get better".

Streamline reporting-back sessions

Teachers should be wary of extended reporting-back sessions at the end of group work. When all students have been discussing the same topic (or doing the same experiment, calculations or exercises), both they and their teacher should be spared the boredom of repetition. The reports, summaries or answers of one or two groups will provide enough information for other groups to check their work or compare their results. The teacher, having moved around the classroom during the group work, does not need to use the reporting-back time to check that the work has been done. The time wasted by having all groups report back to the class is better spent discussing any differences or conflict that may have arisen between groups' results.

When groups have been working on different material, there is often a genuine reason for them to report to other class members. Chapter 7 suggests methods for reporting back, or presenting work to the whole class, that should be more effective than repetitive whole-class report sessions.

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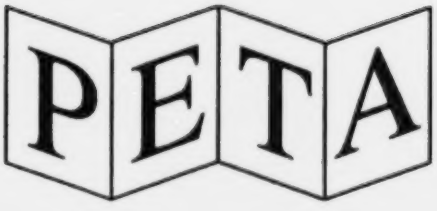

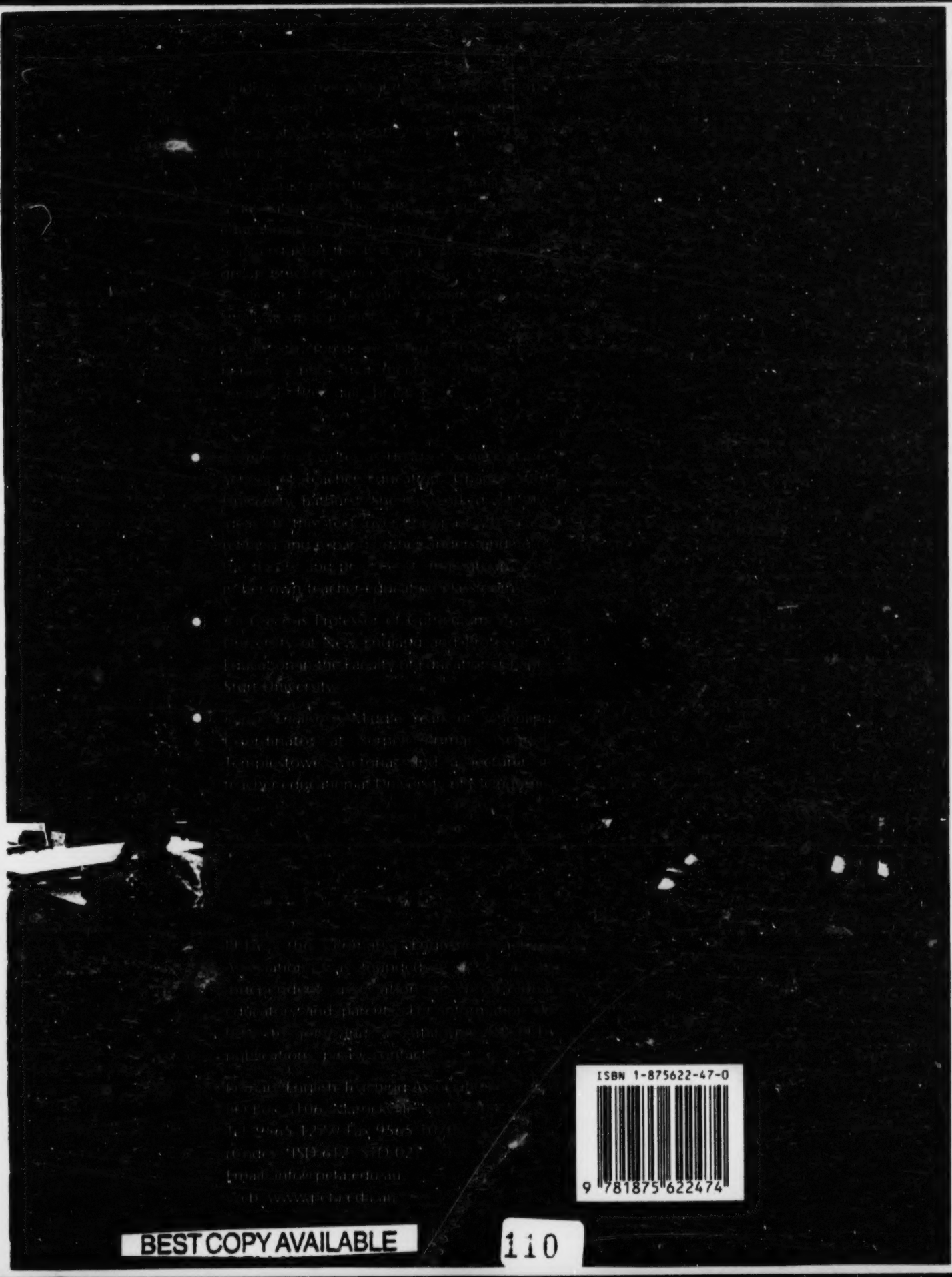

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